

KISSES

TO

Forget

Blairwood
University #2

ANNA B. DOE

KISS TO FORGET

BLAIRWOOD UNIVERSITY #2

ANNA B. DOE

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Copyediting by Leanne Rabesa
Proofreading by Once Upon A Typo
Cover Design by Najla Qamber Designs
Cover Photo by Lindee Robinson Photography

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To Carrie, Melody, and Nina. You girls keep me sane when I think everything else is falling apart. Thank you so much for all your love and help.

“We laughed. We cried. We loved.”
- The Notebook

BLURB

Something about her drew him in from the start.

Yasmin Hernandez—4.0 student, hard worker, volunteer. Starting Blairwood University is her chance at a new beginning. It doesn't matter that it's all a lie, does it?

Nixon Cole has it all—money, good looks, charm and a national championship win to wrap it all up. But there is more hiding behind his charming smile than he lets on.

Until he found out the secret she's been hiding.

Nixon has had a thing for Yasmin from the moment they met, but she isn't about to let another player near her heart. When a chance encounter reveals his secret, Yasmin will realize they have more in common than either of them thought.

Kiss by kiss they'll forget reality. Will it be enough to save them, or will it be the cause of a broken heart?

PROLOGUE

NIXON

CHRISTMAS BALL

“Do you think they’re still at it?” I look toward Zane.

The night is pitch black, and I’m positively buzzed from the party we’ve been at, so I have to squirm to see his broody mug clearly.

“God, I hope not.” He rubs at his face, clearly tired. “The last thing I need is to listen to the headboard of Hayden’s bed bang against my wall all night long.”

The look on Zane’s face—and okay, maybe the alcohol—makes me burst into laughter.

Hayden is another one of our roommates and a wide receiver for the Blairwood Ravens, our college football team for which I’m also playing. He and his girlfriend, Callie, ditched the party as soon as they could. Not that I can blame him. If there’s one good thing about having a girlfriend, it’s the fact that you get to have sex anytime you want without actually having to look for it. Besides, Callie is a cool chick.

“Well, since they just got back together, I’d say you’re out of luck.”

Zane’s only reply is a loud grunt, which only makes me laugh harder.

The front porch light turns on when we move closer, blinding me temporarily.

Home sweet home.

Maddox, our fourth and final roommate, bought this house at the end of our freshman year of college and invited us to come live with him. It was a sweet deal, one I couldn’t refuse, so here we are. My family isn’t poor by any means, and I could afford to rent an apartment of my own, but I love having people around.

Tomorrow though, we’ll be packing to return to our actual homes and families for the upcoming holidays. Finals just finished the other day, and we’ve been waiting for the Christmas ball—an annual celebration here at Blairwood, in which the dean recognizes all the students’ accomplishments that happened in the past year—to be over so we can pack and go.

Zane pulls a key out of his pocket and starts unlocking the door when I

feel my phone vibrate.

“You coming?” Zane asks, looking at me over his shoulder.

I start digging inside my pocket to get to the phone. “What?” I give him a quick look before concentrating on finding the damn thing. “In a minute. Leave it open.”

“Sure thing.”

He closes the door behind him just as my finger wraps around the sleek device. I pull it out, my heart stopping when I see the name on the screen.

“What’s going on?” I ask in a hurry as soon as I accept the call. It’s after two in the freaking morning. Nothing good happens at this time of night.

My worries are confirmed when there is a low snuffle on the other end of the line. Dread swirls inside me, making my gut clench. My stomach rolls uncomfortably, bile rising in my throat.

“Smalls?” I try again, holding on to my sanity as best as I can while all I want to do is yell to get some answers.

“He’s gone, Nix.” Another snuffle. “H-he’s...”

The lump in my throat grows bigger, so big it’s suffocating me. I force it down, trying to hold on to some clarity.

“I’m on my way.”

CHAPTER ONE

NIXON

JANUARY

“Dammit, not again.” I groan as I catch sight of the clock on the wall of the English building I’m heading toward. It’s mocking me with its big needles pointing at ten minutes past two o’clock. Meaning I’m ten minutes late to my English class.

Fucking hell.

In my defense, I didn’t sleep in or anything stupid like that. No, I spent the last two hours working out in the gym and had to hunt down Coach to ask him if I could borrow the DVD to make a copy to do some prep before our upcoming game. The Blairwood Ravens got into the playoff stage of the college football national championship, and we have a real shot at going all the way, so every single player is doing his best to make it happen. It’s my job as starting quarterback, and one of the captains, to set an example. Granted, coming late to class and risking being benched, if it pisses my professor off, isn’t exactly the best way of doing that.

Switching to a full-on run, I take two steps at a time and pray to God that I don’t fall on my ass. Snow has been falling relentlessly, and everything is icy. The last thing I need is to break my fucking leg. That’d be just my luck. But hell, as a quarterback, I need my arm to work, not my leg, so I might still get a chance to play.

A blast of hot air blows in my face as soon as I enter the building. The hallways are empty and quiet. To be honest, they look kind of creepy, like something you’d see in one of those apocalyptic movies. The only sound is the squishing of my boots against the floor as I continue my ascent to the second floor where my class is.

I can hear the professor talking on the other side of the door as soon as I come close enough. Shaking my head to get snow, or what little there is left that hasn’t melted by now, out of my hair, I plaster my famous grin on and push the door open.

YASMIN

“Talk about cutting it close!” Heidi shakes her head but moves her bag off the seat next to her so I can take it instead.

“Tell me about it,” I huff, trying to catch my breath. “It seems like everybody wanted a cup of coffee after lunch. Cup It Up was full, and Monica asked me if I could stay a bit longer to help with the rush.”

Not only is Cup It Up a local coffee and bakery shop, one of my favorite places in the world, but its owner, Monica, is one of the sweetest people I know. There is no way I could have told her no. Plus, extra cash is always welcome. Even if it means having to run across campus so I can get to my class on time.

I’m usually a good runner, but since late fall was rainy and now it’s snowing, I can’t go jogging like I’m used to. I could go to the gym, but seriously, who has time for that? Besides, it’s not the same. The gym is smelly and filled with all kinds of noise. I’d rather have fresh air, the hard ground under my feet, and sounds of nature any day of the week, thank you very much.

“Girl, I seriously don’t know how you do it all.” Heidi shakes her head that all-too-familiar look of amazement people always throw my way when they hear about all the classes I’m taking on top of working and volunteering on her face. What they don’t understand is that for me, it’s nothing special. Is it grueling? Yes, most nights, I fall face-first on the bed and crash for a few hours before the alarm clock wakes me to start it all over again but I have a plan, and I’m determined to stick to it. Besides, it’s all about hard work and good organization.

I met Heidi last semester in our ethics class. We actually worked on a project together for a bit too, so when I met her again here earlier this week, we kind of picked up where we left off.

“It’s just...”

“Your life,” Heidi finishes. “I know, you said it like a dozen times. Still, I think it’s nuts. Positively nuts, but nuts nonetheless. Like, do you even sleep?”

“Occasionally, I do take a quick nap,” I say jokingly. “Who needs sleep anyway? So overrated.”

Slipping out of my jacket, I shake my head at her. Just then, Dr. Stevens

enters the room, effectively making us all shush with every step of her heels.

Knowing she'll get right into it, I quickly open my backpack and pull out a notebook and a pen, flipping to the first empty page.

I'm right because almost as soon as she discards her things on the desk, she takes the podium. "Some of you may know me, but for those of you who don't, my name is Dr. Judith Stevens, and I'll be leading your Shakespeare Seminar. I hope you all read the requirements for this class. Over the course of the semester there will be three pop quizzes, and you'll be required to hand in three critical essays, while the final essay will be a comparison of your work thus far. The final essay has to be handed in on our last class before spring break."

Murmurs start spreading through the room.

"I know, a bit unusual, but I've found it works the best since it leaves you enough time to prepare for finals and forces you to work continuously. Attendance of this class is mandatory; every student has a right to miss two classes, but if you're going to miss more you either have to let me know, or you'll be missing ten percent of your grade. Are there any questions?" She makes a sweep of the room, but nobody says anything. "Good. My office is always open, and you can find my consulting hours on the department's webpage. Now that's settled, tell me, what do you know about William Shakespeare?"

A girl in the front row starts talking almost immediately, and it doesn't take long for other people to join the discussion. I listen carefully, jotting down notes I think might come in handy. Two students from the class, the girl who was the first to speak up and another student, are just in the middle of discussing the question of Shakespeare's authorship when from the corner of my eye, I see the door open. I turn around just as Nixon Cole slips inside, and apparently, I'm not the only one.

"Mister..." Dr. Stevens looks at Nixon with her brows raised in a silent question. He flashes her his cocky grin, the same grin I've come to realize he flashes to everything with a vagina in hopes of charming them off their feet. Sadly? In most cases, it actually works.

"Cole," he supplies. "Nixon Cole."

"Who does he think he is?" I'm not a person prone to fights, but something about Nixon Cole makes me want to slap him. It has from the very first moment I met him, and the need hasn't diminished since then.

Heidi covers her mouth, but I can still hear her soft giggle. "He's Nixon-

fucking-Cole, babe.”

I roll my eyes at that and continue in a sarcastic whisper. “Cole. Nixon Cole.” What mockery. “He’s like a total attention whore, that’s what he is.”

“Well, Mr. Cole.” Dr. Stevens gives him a hard onceover. I wonder what she sees when she looks at him. A football player? A student? A jokester? A womanizer? The guy has too many faces to count. I wonder if any of them are actually real. “I’ll let you slide this time, but this is the *only* time. Next time, don’t even bother to come through this door, because I *will* throw you out on your ass.”

“Thank you.” He flashes another one of those smiles of his. “It won’t happen again.”

Not wanting to try his luck, he nods and starts walking toward a group of guys a few rows below the one I’m sitting in. They’re chuckling, at which he just shakes his head.

Figures.

Boys and their antics.

“Dude, what the hell?” one of them asks.

“He’s always late. Fuck, he’ll probably be late to his own funeral.”

They all burst into laughter at that, but not Nixon. I know because my eyes are still glued to him as I watch him walk toward his friends. That’s why I see him stop mid-step, almost like he’s frozen in time. His smile disappears, a grim shadow falling over his face. It lasts only a heartbeat if that, but I see it, then time restarts, and he’s back to his usual self.

Nixon punches the guy in the arm as he takes his seat. He opens his mouth to say something, but whatever it is is lost because the discussion continues.

But my mind isn’t on Shakespeare any longer.

It’s on Nixon Cole.

What the hell was that?

CHAPTER TWO

NIXON

I'm a vision of a choir boy for the rest of the class, making sure to take notes and keep my mouth shut if I'm not asked a question. Hell, I even joined the discussion at one point and if it's to be judged by the tip of her lips, Dr. Stevens liked what I had to say.

I've heard stories about her before, and they all ended with one conclusive point: do *not* get on her shit list. If you do, you're never getting off of it. Basically, you're screwed.

I'm just packing my shit to go and get something to eat before practice when I see a glimpse of dark hair followed by a whiff of cinnamon passing by me. Lifting my head, I scan the space. It takes me a moment, but I finally see her as she's exiting the classroom.

Yasmin Hernandez.

She's walking in a hurry—I don't think I've ever seen that girl walk slower than in a half-run—with another girl I don't recognize close by her side as they discuss something. Pulling the zipper on my bag closed, I throw it over my shoulder.

"Later," I say to the guys and leave without waiting for an answer.

The hallways are buzzing with activity, completely opposite to the silent graveyard that it was when I was coming in. I keep my eyes on the crazy bun of curls on top of her head as I move through the students.

As soon as I get outside, the cold air blasts in my face, my body shivering from the impact.

"Yasmin, wait!" I call after her, but she doesn't turn around.

I'm not sure why I expected a different outcome. Yasmin's been nothing but hostile toward me since the moment Callie introduced us last semester, and she's done her best to stay away from me. Not that we run in the same circles or anything.

Except now we have a class together, and our best friends are dating. Between the two, she won't be able to avoid me any longer.

Yasmin and her friend speed-walk for a while, and then at the next crosswalk, Yasmin waves goodbye, and they go their separate ways. I should continue after the other girl since that's the way to the cafeteria, but of course, I don't do it.

"Yasmin!" As soon as she's within reach I wrap my hand around her

wrist and pull her to face me.

“What?” she asks, a scowl painted between her brows.

So she did hear me; she just chose to ignore me. I’m not sure if that makes me feel better or worse. What it does is intrigue me. I don’t remember the last time I had such a hard time getting somebody to just talk to me.

Her chocolate eyes throw daggers at me, but her body feels tense under my touch.

What exactly is her problem? We’ve barely been in each other’s company an hour, if that, combined. Callie insists that it’s not me, it’s all the jocks Yasmin has a problem with, but I’ve never heard her talk like that with Hayden, so I call bullshit on that theory. No, it has to be something else, and I’m determined to find out what.

“I thought it was you I saw in English class just a while ago,” I say, choosing to start this conversation on a light note.

“Well you sure as hell made sure everybody knew you were in class, Mr. Cole. Nixon Cole.” Yasmin puffs a wavy strand of hair out of her face.

My lip twitches at her mocking me. She looks quite adorable when she’s pissed like this, like a little kitten. If I only knew how to find the right spot to give her a scratch, I’m sure she’d be purring happily in my hands.

“Not a fan of James Bond?”

“I don’t care one way or the other about Bond. I just find it insufferable that people actually think they can own it.”

I burst out laughing, which only makes her scowl harder. “Oh, baby, I can own it just fine.”

Yasmin rolls her eyes and pulls her hand out of mine. “Was there something you needed? Because I have places to be.”

“Anywhere in particular?” I ask, fishing for information.

Yasmin gives me another infuriated sigh and starts walking again. Without missing a beat, I follow in her footsteps, ignoring a side glare she throws at me.

“Library. Sound familiar? The place where people go to study.”

“I know the library very well. I have even occasionally stepped inside.” I feign a mock gasp. “Can you believe it?”

“Not sure why I should care.” She shrugs her shoulder, her puffy jacket moving with the motion.

See what I’m saying? Yasmin Hernandez hates my guts. And for some fucked-up reason, I can’t seem to let it go. Hell, on some level I even like it. I

like that she doesn't just fall for my charm and empty words, but actually makes me work for it.

I narrow my eyes at her, contemplating. "Is there a particular reason you don't like me? Or maybe you don't like guys in general."

At this, she laughs. Actually laughs.

"So predictable." Yasmin rolls her eyes. "Why is it that guys think just because a girl doesn't like them, she's not into guys at all? We're allowed to not like just *some* guys. And as it turns out, I don't like overbearing, get-in-your-face, thinks-he's-God's-gift-to-women guys in particular."

"That is pretty specific."

"I'm a specific kind of girl."

"I'm starting to realize that."

"Well, at least you realize *something*." Suddenly she stops. "If there's nothing you actually need to discuss with me, I have shit to do."

Realizing this is getting us nowhere, I lift my hands in surrender. "I'll let you be."

For now.

A frown between her brows deepens, her mouth opening, then closing, as if she thinks I'll protest, and she'll have to fight me on it.

You aren't the only one who can keep people on their toes, Yasmin. Not by far.

"Great." Once again, she tries to puff out the strand of hair that's getting in her face. Taking a step forward, I close the distance between us.

"It's stuck."

Yasmin inhales sharply, and I can feel the way her body tenses, but I don't step back. Instead, I reach forward and softly push the lock behind her ear before moving back once again, not once breaking our stare.

Yasmin sucks her lower lip between her teeth, grazing over the soft flesh before letting it pop out.

"Great," she repeats, her voice growing huskier and doing things to me it most definitely shouldn't. Not after the cold shower she gave me just moments earlier. "Thanks. I'll go now. See you around."

She nods decisively, closing the conversation. Turning on the balls of her feet, she continues on her way, not once looking back.

"See you around, Yas."

CHAPTER THREE

YASMIN

Knocking on the door so I don't startle her, I peek my head inside. "Hey Cals, ready to go?"

My best friend and roommate's head snaps up when she hears me, a smile forming on her lips. "Sure thing. Just gimme a second."

I watch her lean in and help one of the kids, Joseph, I think, with his drawing before patting him on the shoulder and straightening up.

I met Callie on my first day at Blairwood. To say we started off on the wrong foot would be an understatement. Neither of us was particularly happy to be there for different reasons. Callie especially, since she was supposed to have her own room, but me enrolling late ended up cramping her style. We've come a long way since then.

"Have any plans for tonight? I figured you could come with me..."

"It's Tuesday," I interrupt her. My explanation is vague, but she gets it.

"O-ho. Meeting the mystery guy?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

If only you knew, I think, but keep the words to myself.

"You know the drill," I say instead. Nobody knows my Tuesday plans, not Callie, nor Chloe, our next-door neighbor and another friend of ours. They figured out I'm always missing on Tuesday evenings and dubbed them nights with my imaginary suitor or some shit like that. Who even uses the word suitor anymore? Still, I don't bother correcting them.

"Will you ever tell us who he is?" she questions as we leave Bright Haven, waving goodbye to the kids on our way out. Bright Haven is a local community center that we both volunteer at. I tutor a few times a week while Callie leads an art class. I actually have my own past with the center since I, myself, was an attendee at the center in the New York area. So when I heard there was one open here, I decided to give it a look and sign up as a volunteer. The center saved my ass more than once when I was younger, since living with a single mom in a city like New York has never been especially easy, but we overcame it, and now I'm here, studying at one of the best colleges in the States.

"Not if I can help it," I mutter quietly.

Pulling the keys out of my pocket, I unlock my old Ford and slide behind the wheel. From the corner of my eye, I catch Callie stiffening for a second

before she coaches herself and gets in on the other side of the car.

At first I found it strange, but later on, Callie confessed that her parents died in a car accident in which she was the driver, and although the accident wasn't her fault, she felt guilty because she is the only one who came out of it alive, although far from unscathed. She has a fair number of scars, starting with the ones covering the left side of her face, reminding her of what she's been through. Not that she needs the reminder—that day still haunts her nightmares.

“But don't you think it would be nice if we could double-date sometime? It would be fun.”

I roll my eyes at her. This isn't our first rodeo. “Trust me when I say it wouldn't.”

“How can you know?” She puffs a strand of hair that slipped her braid out of her face. “Seriously, Yas. You make me wonder, who is that guy, and *why* exactly are you unwilling to introduce him to us?”

“How do you even know it's a he? Maybe it's a she.”

She gives me a skeptical look. “Is it?”

“No, but that's beside the point.”

“That's exactly the point! There has to be something wrong if you're not willing to introduce him to us.”

“Just because you're happy and in love doesn't mean we all have to be.” I sigh, tired of this discussion.

“I want my friends to be happy. Is that so bad?”

“No, but I'm happy the way I am. Besides, Mr. Tuesday doesn't have anything to do with my love life.”

Okay, that's a lie.

He's a part of the reason I don't believe in that crap.

Not anymore.

When I finally drop Callie off at her boyfriend's, I rush back to our dorm to quickly change, and then I'm hurrying out once again so I'm not late.

These days it seems like all I do is run this way or that, but I prefer it that way. As long as I keep my head down and stay on my schedule, I won't have too much time to think about all the secrets that I keep piling up.

Once I get into the familiar neighborhood, one of the best in Blairwood and surrounding areas, I slow the car. Because, of course, he wants the best. He can afford it too.

I know I don't have much of a choice. Not if I want to keep everybody happy.

Suck it up, buttercup.

Rolling my car to a stop in front of the familiar two-story colonial, I take one deep breath, putting all the shields I spent years building firmly in place. Since I spent the winter break in New York with my mother, I haven't been here since last semester, but I knew he expected me today.

Here we go again.

Taking my bag from the passenger seat, I clench it tightly and get out of the car, not bothering to lock up. This is too nice of a neighborhood for anybody to try and steal my piece of shit car, and I don't want any obstacles in the way in case I need to flee.

If a big city teaches you anything, it's to always be on the lookout and always have a way out.

Not letting my nerves get the better of me, I cross the distance toward the front door in a few long strides and ring the doorbell.

Then I wait.

My heart is beating loudly in my chest, my palms growing sweaty with nerves.

It's always like this, no matter how many times I tell myself it doesn't matter and that I don't care. I don't want to care, but a part of me that I buried deep inside still does no matter how much I try to pretend otherwise.

The footsteps behind the wooden door come closer; the lock turns, and the door slides open. I lift my gaze from his chest all the way to his eyes.

"Yasmin," he says coolly.

"Coach Davies."

His face turns grim, well, grimmer if that's even possible. I don't think I've ever seen the guy smile. Not that I actually care if he does or not.

"I thought we agreed you'd call me Jeremy."

"No, that's what you said, but I never agreed," I correct, entering the house. The last thing I need is for somebody to see me come here. Not that I think there are many of my fellow students living around these parts, but you can never be sure.

Coach sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Do you always have to be

so difficult?”

Not even bothering to turn to look at him, I walk down the hallway and into the kitchen. “I’m not one of your players, Coach. You can’t boss me around. Besides, you know exactly what you have to do in order for all of this to stop.”

The door closes, and he follows after me. “You know I can’t do that.”

“You *won’t*,” I correct him. “There’s a difference.”

“Do I have to remind you that you’re the one who came to me?”

His harsh words make me flinch. They sting, and he knows it. I hate the fact that I had to reach out to him, of all people, when I was at my lowest. And even more than that, I hate having it thrown in my face every time I see him. Hell, just having to see him is a slap to my pride, but there was no avoiding it. Not if I want to keep my secrets to myself.

“I’m sorry, I...” he starts, but I wave him off, not wanting to hear his apologies.

“Don’t. Just...” I suck in a breath, trying to collect myself. “Let’s get this over with.”

The silence that falls over us is deafening. The air in the room is filled with pent-up tension that seems to permeate the space. Or maybe it’s me who brings it every time I come; either way, I can’t discuss this any longer.

“Very well,” he finally concedes.

Coach moves to the stove and stirs something that’s simmering in a pot. I didn’t even see it until this very moment, but now I do. The air smells nice; it always does when he’s cooking. The smells of tomato and spices fill the room, making my stomach react and reminding me I haven’t eaten in a while.

For a single guy—that I know of, not that I actually bothered to ask, that or anything else for that matter—he’s actually quite a good cook. Not that I’d admit it out loud.

“How are classes going?” he asks, still engrossed in preparing dinner.

I noticed he does it often. Making sure he’s doing something else while he’s asking questions, so it doesn’t seem like he’s questioning me.

I look around, needing to do... something.

The table is already set, leaving me without anything to occupy myself, so I reluctantly sit down, opting for the table instead of a bar chair that separates the kitchen space from the dining room. The further away from him that I am, the better.

“They’re okay. The semester just started, but I’m sure it’ll pick up in no

time.”

“How many did you take this time?”

That didn’t take too long. I steel myself as I say, “Six.”

He sighs. “You know you don’t have to…”

Irritated with the way this conversation is going, *again*, I snap at him. “I want it that way, so leave it.”

Coach opens his mouth to say something, but then shakes his head, and thankfully, lets it go, changing the subject instead. “Are you still volunteering?”

“Yup, I just came from there. I had to drop my friend at her boyfriend’s house before coming here.”

He hums noncommittally. “Callie, was it?”

For a moment, I’m surprised that he remembered, but then again, he’s always been good at remembering details. Well, all but *one* little detail, but that’s definitely *not* a topic we talk about.

Ever.

“Yes.”

“She’s still your roommate?”

“For this semester.”

I’m not sure what will happen next year, though. Callie and Hayden are really happy, and since they got back together, she’s been spending a lot of time at his place, just coming by the dorms to change and pick up some of her things before dashing out again. If they continue this way, by the end of the school year, they’ll talk about moving in together, I’m sure of it.

Coach turns off the stove and picks up whatever he’s been cooking to bring it to the table.

“Hope you like spaghetti Bolognese.”

The yummy smell reaches my nostrils, and my stomach grumbles in response. Loudly.

“That’s fine.” I shrug, trying to play it cool.

Since I know he’ll wait for me to fill my plate first, I reach out to grab pasta covered in sauce and put it on my plate, adding a bit of Parmesan on top.

I wait for him to do the same, and then we eat for a bit in tense silence, with only the sound of utensils scratching against the dishes filling the air.

My whole body is stiff, although I’ve become good at presenting a cool front in the past few months. I have to come here, but I don’t have to make it

easy on him. If it were up to me, I wouldn't come here in the first place.

Coach is the one who keeps the conversation going. He's the one asking questions while I give him the bare minimum to satisfy his curiosity, never bothering to offer more than necessary and never asking anything in return.

I have to be here once a week, but I don't have to like it, and I most definitely don't want to get to know him.

He swallows his bite, and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "How were your holidays? Did you have fun in the city?"

I shrug, the bite I just swallowed feeling like a brick wall that fell on my stomach. "It was okay. Saw friends. Started reading some books that I'll need for the upcoming semester. That's about it."

A heartbeat passes in silence. Two. Three. And then...

"How is your mother?"

My whole body grows rigid. It always does when he brings her up.

"I thought we had an agreement," I say quietly.

"Yasmin..."

"No!" I let the fork fall out of my hands, and I push back from the table, chair scraping against the floorboards. "You don't talk about her. You don't ask about her. You don't even speak her name."

"I'm just worried."

"Well, you're too little too late, don't cha think?" This time it's he who flinches at my words. Good. He can hurt too. He *should* hurt.

Taking my jacket, I pull it over to me and grab my bag. "I'm done here. See you next week."

Not waiting for him to say anything, I rush out of the room as fast as I can.

How will I keep doing this for two and a half more years? And that's if I manage to keep up with the tempo I've had since coming to Blairwood.

"Yasmin, wait!" he calls after me from the kitchen, but I don't listen.

The door is just in front of me. In a few seconds, I'll be out, and I won't have to see him. Well, for a week, at least.

Grabbing the handle, I twist it and open the door, welcoming the chilly January air touching my heated skin.

"Yasmin?"

That is until I see him.

"What are you doing here?"

And now I know I'm screwed.

CHAPTER FOUR

NIXON

“Yasmin?” I blink, trying to understand what is happening here, but nope. She’s still here; I didn’t imagine it. “What are you doing here?”

Yasmin is looking at me with those wide, dark eyes, like a deer caught in the headlights. They’re filled with fear and trepidation, her mouth forming a little O in surprise.

I narrow my eyes at her, but before I can say anything a movement behind her catches my attention. I lift my gaze over her shoulder to see Coach approaching. Like Yasmin, he seems surprised to see me standing there, faltering for a moment before he regains his cool, a mask falling over his face.

What is going on here? What the hell is Yasmin, of all people, doing storming out of Coach’s house?

“Nixon, I...”

I look back at her, lifting my brows, waiting to see what kind of explanation she has to give me for all of this.

Coach moves closer, stopping just behind her. He isn’t touching her in any way, but I can feel my jaw tighten at his proximity. The familiarity it implies.

Is there something going on between the two of them?

“Nixon, how can I help you?” Coach finally asks, breaking the silence.

I lift the disc I borrowed from him with two fingers. “I came to return this. I know you like to go over it first thing in the morning.” My eyes go to Yasmin and then return to him. “I probably should have called.”

“You should have,” he agrees, and it only serves to piss me off more.

What is his deal? With Yasmin of all people? Is he... Are they... Is there something going on between them? Isn’t he aware that she’s a student here?

Yasmin finally snaps out of it. “I’ll leave you two be.”

With that, she slips between the two of us.

I watch him watch her leave, his face softening just a bit. Pain, yearning, and something else I’m not sure how to name cross his features. I turn around and catch a glimpse of her car. It was parked a bit down the street so, I didn’t notice it until this very moment.

“Did I interrupt something?” I ask, drawing his attention back to me. I don’t like the way he looks at her. Like he knows something about her

nobody else does. Like there is more between them than meets the eyes. Like she's *his*.

My hands tighten into fists by my sides, an inexplicable anger brewing inside me. I want to punch him; hell, if he were any other person, I'd probably do it. No questions asked.

"No, it's fine." He rubs at his face and sighs, then notices the disc. He takes it from my hand. "Thanks for bringing this, Nixon."

And with that, I'm dismissed.

Nodding my agreement, I say goodbye and go back to my car. Once the door is closed behind me, I lean against the seat and look at the ceiling.

What just happened?

"Why do you keep glaring at Coach?" Hayden asks as he joins me on the sidelines. He grabs a bottle of water and sprays it straight into his mouth, not even bothering to take off his helmet.

"Do you know what his deal is?"

From the corner of my eyes I can see Hayden's confused expression. "His deal?" he repeats.

"Yeah. Like what do we know about the guy?" I watch as Coach works on a play with a few of the running backs.

"He's the coach, what's there to know?"

Hayden's right, and if it were any other day, I wouldn't think twice about it, I wouldn't even be asking this question in the first place, but I still can't get what happened last night out of my head. Seeing Yasmin storm out of there, with Coach on her heels. The look on his face as he watched her leave.

There is something there, and for some reason, I can't let it go.

"I don't know," I mutter, irritated with myself. This is the last thing I should be thinking about. The Ravens are just a few days away from playing in the college championship game, something that slipped through our fingers last year. I should be concentrating on that, not on the fact that my coach might or might not be fucking one of my classmates.

Fuck, just thinking about it makes my stomach turn.

"What is all this about?" Hayden asks after a while.

I shake my head, forcing myself to snap out of it. "Nothing."

“You sure?”

I start to nod, but just then, Coach turns toward us.

“Cole! Watson! This isn’t a coffee shop; get your asses on the field.”

Crumpling the plastic bottle that was forgotten in my hand, I throw it into the recycle bin. Hayden does the same, and together we run to the field, all thoughts except getting the ball into the end zone pushed out of my mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

YASMIN

“You can’t *not* go,” Callie says firmly, crossing her arms over her chest, a determined look on her face.

“I most certainly can.” And just to prove my point, I slide a strand of hair behind my ear and turn my attention back to the book that’s sitting on my desk. The semester has barely begun, but there is no such thing as too early to start on the coursework. So that’s exactly what I’m planning to do. That is until Callie stomps toward me and pulls the book out of my hands.

“¡Oye! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I try to grab it, but Callie is faster.

“Just getting back at you for all the shit you pulled on me last semester.”

“I don’t remember asking you to do anything.”

“You didn’t ask and now payback’s a bitch,” Callie says with a sugary sweet smile plastered on her face.

“Díos,” I huff. “I hate you.”

Callie grins, knowing she’s won. “I love that you speak Spanish when you’re pissed off. Why don’t you do it more often?”

Knowing there is no way she’ll let it go and preferring it to the other subject she wants to discuss, I sigh and lean into my chair.

“I’m not sure. My mom’s Mexican, and I grew up in a house where we spoke Spanish, but outside...” I shrug, letting the words hang in the air.

The truth is, I’ve never been ashamed of who I am or where I come from. I’m the person I am today, thanks to my mother and all she sacrificed to help me get here. But there has always been this other part of me that felt like a fake. Yes, my mother is Mexican, but my sperm donor is white. I’m a mix between the two; too white to be full Latina, but too dark to be white. And it’s not even just about the color of my skin. While most Latin Americans are on the shorter and curvier side, I took after my father, reaching around five foot seven. And while I do have curves, I’m not as curvy as some of the other Hispanic girls that lived in my old neighborhood.

My mom came to the States when she was relatively young, but being Mexican, she had a hard time fitting in. Even now, her accent is still thick, and although she never said it out loud, I know she’s felt the stigma of her origin hanging above her head all these years. She didn’t want that destiny for me. She wanted me to have a better life, but that better life only

accentuated the differences I felt between my peers and me. And that's not including the fact that my Catholic mother raised me all on her own, never marrying.

"It's a long story," I finally finish, snapping out of my thoughts.

A soft, knowing smile curls her lips. Only a few months ago, Callie wouldn't even bother asking the question since she has had her fair share of secrets, but since then, she's worked through some of her demons.

Callie lays her hand on my shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. Our gazes meet, understanding passing between us. "When you're ready," she whispers gently, then she shoves me. "Now get your ass out of this chair. Chloe will be here soon to pick us up."

"Callie," I moan in protest.

"No, you don't, missy." Callie wiggles her finger in my face. "You're getting your ass out of this chair and changing. If you don't, a few minutes from now, you'll get your ass up either way since we'll drag you outside."

"I'm not interested in football!"

She rolls her eyes. "I know, I know. You're not into athletes and blah, blah, blah... but this isn't just any game. The Ravens are playing for the title of national champions. It's a big deal. You have to go. Hell, even Cup It Up is closed for today since *everybody* will be watching the game."

I hate it when she's right. I wanted to pick up a shift, but Monica, the owner, informed me she wouldn't be opening today because of the game. Apparently, her boyfriend is a huge fan, and they'll be watching together, and she didn't see the point in opening it up for business since nobody will be around to come to the shop. I see her point, but it doesn't mean I have to like it.

Stupid football game.

"Well, if *everybody*," I make a point of drawing out the word, "will be there, then there really is no point in me having to go, now is there? I don't even like football."

Despise it is more like it, but I'm not about to expand on the topic any more than necessary. Callie is the master of twisting words to have them fit her agenda.

"But Hayden got us the tickets. *Three* tickets, so you have to go."

"Which was really nice and totally unnecessary."

I think Hayden is the only football player I actually like. After you overlook his creepy stalkerish factor, he's a nice guy. And he's really good

for Callie, so it's not like I can hate him.

Before she can say anything else, there is a knock on the door.

"It's open!" Callie yells, just as it opens, and Chloe enters in all her black and gold glory.

"You guys ready?"

Callie narrows her eyes at me. "We would be if she wasn't so damned difficult."

Now two matching scowls are turned to me.

Well, shit.

The crowd roars loudly in approval as one of the players in black breaks away from the rest of them and starts running. And since we're sitting in the black section, I guess that's us.

It takes a moment for the rest of them to notice that the ball isn't there, but when they do, it's already too late.

Chloe squeals loudly, jumping up and down, and Callie is fist-pumping. The seats are shaking as what feels like all of the stadium gets on their feet and stomps happily.

Everybody *but* me.

Chloe must realize it too, because, she turns around to look at me. Her excitement is palpable, making her cheeks pink. Or maybe that's cold. Because it's freezing outside, and I don't understand how anybody can play in this weather, much less why somebody would willingly pay to sit and watch for *hours*.

"How can you be so chill? We're winning. *Winning, Yas!*"

"For all I care we could be losing, and I wouldn't give a damn."

They might have forced me to come, but there is no way I actually have to pay attention or enjoy the game.

Chloe's eyes grow wide, and she looks around to see if somebody heard me.

"Shush, you! You can't be saying shit like that; it's bad luck."

I just shrug. Not my problem, honey. "You should have thought about that before dragging me all the way here."

She shakes her head. "What did football ever do to you?"

A memory that I thought long forgotten flashes before my eyes, but I push it back before it can fully form.

“It’s not what, it’s *who*,” I murmur softly, but fans are already yelling something, and my friends’ attention is back on the field, just like I want it.

NIXON

“Now’s our chance to seal this motherfucker down,” Prescott mutters from next to me as we watch our defense intercept the ball. Alec O’Brien is living up to his nickname, The Brick Wall, pushing through the opposing team like they’re merely irritating flies in his way.

“Hell yes,” Hayden agrees, jumping to his feet and loosening his muscles like he’s preparing for a boxing match and not to play football. “Let’s hope you have enough strength to throw a long one, old man.”

“The better question is if you can catch it, asshole,” I throw back instantly.

The crowd erupts into a loud roar as O’Brien’s tackled to the ground.

“Cole! Watson! Wentworth!” Coach’s bark draws our attention. “Are you done chatting? Get your asses on the field, now!”

“Yes, Coach,” we say in unison.

Prescott and I shoot to our feet, and together we run to the field just as the defense is getting to the sidelines. Hayden and I exchange a look. That’s all we need, one look. You’d think we’ve been playing together all our lives, but in reality, we only met last year at training camp. Still, from the very first moment, something between us clicked on a deeper level. We could read each other without a problem. I always know where he is on the field, and he’d almost without a fault be able to catch anything I throw at him.

Everybody takes their places, and I take in our rivals on the other side of the line. They’re trying to hold it together, but I can see the cracks in their defense, and I plan to exploit them to our benefit.

I call out the play, my players falling in line. The center snaps the ball into my waiting hands.

One. Two. Three.

I pull back, getting into the pocket, my arm extending. There is a familiar resistance of the light breeze, the feel of the leather in my palms. And then I let the ball fly, watching it spiral through the air.

Hayden jumps in the air, his arms wrapping around the ball and tucking it into his side as he falls back to the ground and starts running. We get twenty yards before he’s pinned to the ground.

First down.

The whistle blows, and players get on their feet. We move down the field,

setting in position once again.

I glance at the clock ticking down the final minutes. Sweat coats my brows, but my hands are steadily holding onto the pigskin.

I call out another play, and the ball snaps into my hands. I turn to throw at Hayden, but the defense has a hold on him.

Fuck.

Switching to the right, I see an opening and throw it, but it's already too late. Before my receiver can catch the ball, the play is already read.

“Move!” I yell, but it takes a second for everybody to react and adjust.

They're well into our side of the field when we snap out of it. The field is a mess of bodies fighting for dominance.

For a moment, I think we've gone and done it, but then cheering erupts from the crowd.

I lift my gaze and find Prescott grabbing the ball. It rings in my ears from the blood pumping in my veins as I watch him run, two players hot on his feet.

Just as one's about to grab him, Prescott laterals the ball to Hayden, who catches it mid-air, not slowing down until he's firmly in the end zone.

The crowd screams as the horn signals the touchdown.

The victory is ours, baby.

CHAPTER SIX

NIXON

“Who’re the motherfucking winners?” I yell at the top of my lungs, my hands thrown over Hayden’s and Prescott’s shoulders. If it weren’t for the two of them, we wouldn’t have made it. That last play is still playing in my mind on repeat. The way Prescott intercepted that ball and lateraled it to Hayden for a touchdown was insane.

“We are!” the crowd roars right back at me, followed by chants of “Ravens! Ravens!” Somebody pops open the champagne, the cork ending God only knows where.

Hayden takes the bottle and throws it over my head. The sticky liquid blinds me, my clothes soaking through, something I barely notice with the fire still burning in my veins.

We just won the fucking national championship, and I’m riding a high like nothing else I’ve ever experienced.

“Shouldn’t you be the one getting a champagne shower, Mr. MVP?” I ask him, wiping at my eyes.

Somebody must have heard me because another bottle is opened and shoved into my hands. I don’t waste time pouring it over his head, saving a little bit for Prescott too.

Thank God we’re outside because I’m sure Maddox would have a coronary right about now.

But it’s not like you win a championship every day. No, this is a special moment, one we’ll remember forever.

When you’re an athlete, there are only so many highs you can reach. For most of the guys on the team, playing college is that high. Not everybody will get a chance to be drafted into the pros, but all of us here can say that at one point, we won the college championship and said goodbye to our careers with a bang.

Hayden laughs, pulling the hem of his shirt up to wipe his face and shaking the champagne out of his hair. “As somebody once pointed out, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything if the ball didn’t land in my hands.”

“Well, it must have been somebody really smart,” I joke.

“Do you two plan to bore us all into an early grave with your mushy bromance, or are we going to party?” Emmett asks, one of his hands thrown around his girlfriend Katherine, the other holding a bottle of Jack.

“Crank that shit up,” I yell to no one in particular. But sure enough, somebody is listening because not even half a minute passes before music is blasting from the speakers, followed by the approving roar of the crowd.

I jump off the table to the ground, Hayden and Prescott following behind me, and together we join the party.

Drinks are thrust into our hands, and everywhere we go, people want to congratulate us on the win. I accept every fist bump and shoulder slap, tossing back shots like they’re water.

Girls are fighting for our attention, wanting to get their hands on any available player, and even some not so available.

I chuckle as I watch Callie stare daggers at a girl who’s shamelessly flirting with Hayden right in front of her.

Talk about clueless.

“What’s so funny?”

I turn my gaze down to the girl that’s plastered to my side. She’s wearing one of those tight little black dresses that hugs her every curve; a seductive smile painted on her bright red lips. Her matching red fingertips are playing with the collar of my shirt.

“Just finding it funny how desperate some people can be,” I say, taking a pull from the bottle in my hand.

Whiskey burns as it slides down my throat.

The girl, what’s-her-name, pouts but doesn’t comment. Instead, she rises on her toes and presses her lips against my ear.

“Want to take this celebration somewhere more private?” she purrs, flicking her tongue over my ear before pulling back and batting her eyelashes at me.

I’m about to take her up on her offer when I feel my phone buzz in my pocket. Instantly, all my attention goes on alert. Forgetting about her completely, I pull the phone out to check the caller ID.

“I have to take this,” I mutter absentmindedly, already pulling away and moving purposefully through the crowd, accepting the call.

“Hey, everything okay?”

“Nix! Oh, my freaking God, that was amazing.” The excited squeal from the other side of the line relaxes me slightly but does little to calm my rapidly beating heart.

“Thanks,” I yell back so she can hear me. “Gimme a second. I have to get somewhere quiet.”

Still clenching my phone to my ear, I hurry upstairs, where I know I should find a little quiet. There are more people in the house, who try to grab my attention, but I wave them away and hurry up the stairs where a blessed quiet greets me, calming the raging inside my head. My brain is still buzzing with the sound of hard bass coming from the speakers downstairs.

“I’m here, sorry.”

“No need to be sorry.” Her voice grows softer. “You guys are celebrating.”

“The house was already crammed by the time we showed up,” I admit.

“Well, you did just win the national championship!” The excitement in her voice is palpable.

“We did, didn’t we?” It was still insane to think about it.

“Hell yes!” A soft giggle comes from the other side, but slowly dies down. “We did get to catch it online.”

My eyes squeeze shut. “Thanks, Jade. I appreciate you watching.”

“I wish we’d gotten to come, but...” she sighs. There is that all-too-familiar wistfulness in her tone. “Maybe next year we can come and watch it live.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as my heart squeezes painfully. “Yeah, maybe,” I whisper back, knowing the reality of that happening is slim but not wanting to voice it out loud, not wanting to break what little hope she has. Life will do that for me soon enough, and I’ll be left to pick up the pieces.

“I wish you could have been here too. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Nix. You coming home soon?”

Another punch to my gut.

Home.

I wasn’t sure what that was anymore. But there was no way I was disappointing her.

“Sure thing, Smalls. Things should slow down now that the season is over, so I should come more often.”

Although my family lives not even an hour away from Blairwood University, with my crazy schedule, it’s hard to find time to go back for a visit. Between my classes, the gym, and practice, there is barely time for me to shit in peace, much less anything else.

“I can’t wait to see you.”

The happiness in her voice is so pure and genuine, it makes me feel even worse for waiting so long to go for a visit. Although the rational part of my

brain knows there is nothing I could have done differently, it doesn't help me feel any better knowing that she's dealing with this shit all on her own, while I get a pass.

"Soon, Jade."

Somebody says something in the background; I can't decipher the words, just hear Jade sigh.

"Gotta go, Nix. We'll talk later."

"Kiss her goodnight for me," I whisper, reluctant to say goodbye.

"Will do. I love you."

"Love you too."

She hangs up on me so I pull the phone back, holding it tightly in my grip. I just need a moment to collect myself, but before I can even take a breath, a floorboard creaks loudly somewhere behind me.

My whole body goes stiff as I realize that I'm not alone.

YASMIN

Holy shit, what's with all these people?

A group of giggling girls starts to complain when I push one of them away to make some space to pass through. The house is packed, as in filled-to-the-brim, would-not-pass-fireman-assessment kind of packed. It feels like everybody in a twenty-mile radius is here celebrating the championship win.

I tried to get out of it, but of course, Chloe and Callie wouldn't have it, so instead of fighting them, I decided to give in, show my face for a while just to say I was here, and they could stop nagging me, have a drink, and then ditch before either of them noticed it, texting them only when I'm safely tucked in my bed.

If that makes me a sucky friend, so be it.

After spending what seemed like hours in the stadium and having a couple of drinks with the girls, my bladder has finally given up on me, so I put my plan into motion. Pit stop at the bathroom, and then I'm getting out of here. If only people would get out of my way.

"Hey!" somebody else protests as I shove past them, but I don't hear the rest because I'm already ducking underneath another person's arm and am swallowed by the crowd.

It takes me too damn long to get to the bathroom. I don't want to bother with the downstairs one, since I know the line is probably insanely long. Instead, I go straight for the stairs.

I've been at Hayden and Nixon's house a few times before, and on one of those outings, Callie took me to the upstairs bathroom and told me to use it if necessary.

The second floor is blessedly empty, which is strange for a party of this magnitude, but then again, none of the guys living here seem like the type to let random couples hook up in their beds. If anybody's going to be hooking up, it's them.

Thanking God that the bathroom is empty, I slide inside and quickly do my business, sighing in relief. Once I'm done, I get out and wash my hands, ready to be done with all of this.

Turning off the light on my way out, I'm in the hallway once again, only this time it's not empty.

"Thanks, Jade. I appreciate you watching." There is silence when this

Jade person says something. “Yeah, maybe.” He sighs, like the weight of the world is sitting on his shoulders. “I wish you could have been here too. I miss you.” Another pause. I can see his shoulders grow tense as he listens to whatever the girl is saying.

“Sure thing, Smalls.” There is a softness to his tone that is so unfamiliar and clashes with the player I know him to be. “Things should slow down now that the season is over, so I should come more often.”

A frown appears between my brows. Come? Come where? What is he talking about? And who’s this Jade? A high school sweetheart of his? I want to snort but manage to hold it in. Somebody should tell her what a manwhore her boyfriend is.

“I can’t wait to see you.”

Yeah right. I barely hold in a snort. *If she believes that crap, she’s a delusional fool.*

“Soon, Jade.” Another pause. “Kiss her goodnight for me.”

Her? I feel the frown on my face deepen. Her who?

“Love you too.”

I’m still mulling over his words, and I almost don’t notice him hanging up. Nixon grips the phone in his hands, head hanging low. He looks almost... defeated.

It can’t be.

Nixon shifts his weight from one leg to the other. I suck in a breath, finally realizing that at any moment, he could turn around and see me lurking in the shadows, listening to his conversation.

Fuck, I have to get out of here.

Turning on the balls of my feet, I start to get away but the floorboard creaks. I cringe, my whole body going still.

Maybe he didn’t hear it. Maybe...

“What the fuck?”

Of course he heard, because why would it be any different? My body startles from the harshness of his words. His tone is the complete opposite of the tone he used when he talked to the girl on the phone. Which if you think about it is pretty fucked up. Why cheat on her if you obviously care about her? I’ll never understand guys.

“Who’s...” Nixon trails off.

There is a shift in the air, and even without looking, I know that he’s turned toward me and is watching my back. I can feel his laser gaze boring

into my spine.

Tilting my head back, I curse myself for not leaving as soon as I realized I'm not alone. There wasn't a reason for me to stay behind and listen in on his conversation. None at all. Yet, for some reason, my body didn't want to go.

Knowing there is no escaping it, I sigh and turn around to face him.

"Yasmin," he breathes as he sees me. But not a second passes before his face turns grim, his body stiffening.

"Nixon," I say in the way of greeting. I'm not going to cower since I did nothing wrong.

Keep telling yourself that.

"What are you doing here?"

"Using the bathroom." I throw my finger over my shoulder to point at the closed door. "Callie showed it to me once, and it was crowded downstairs."

His eyes narrow, assessing me. "And you just decided to stay and listen to my conversation?"

"I wasn't listening in on anything." I cross my arms over my chest, tilting my chin up. There is no way I'm letting him pin this on me. If he wanted to keep this conversation secret, he should have gone to his room. Asshole. "I was surprised to find you here since I wasn't expecting anybody."

"Well, it is my house."

"I know that very well." It's hard to forget it when people are chanting his name like he found the cure for cancer.

"And yet you still decided to come here." He tilts his head to the side as if thinking. "I thought you didn't want anything to do with me?"

I grit my teeth. "It wasn't exactly my choice, okay?"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, *really*. If you forgot, our best friends are in a relationship." I glare at him pointedly. "Not like you know anything about that, now do you?"

I'm so pissed, and I don't even know why. I shouldn't care one bit if Nixon is or isn't dating some poor soul and fucking everything that has a vagina behind her back, but I can't seem to get it out of my mind.

I love you too.

What kind of a woman would get those words out of mighty Nixon Cole? Does it even matter? Because, quite clearly, they're just plain words. And those mean jack shit if not backed up by actions.

"And you do?" Nixon shakes his head, chuckling as he walks closer. So

close that I notice that his jersey is clinging to his broad shoulders, and his hair is still damp and disheveled. From his own fingers, or did some groupie run them over his golden-brown strands? “Tell me, Yasmin, is it just players you’re not interested in, or does that extend to coaches too?”

What the hell?

I step back, my body colliding with the wall.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh please, don’t play innocent.” Nixon laughs, but the sound lacks humor. “I saw you. For all your talk about how you’re not interested in athletes, you don’t seem to have a problem sleeping with Coach. Is that what does it for you? Old guys like him?”

I react before I can think of it, my hand shooting forward and slapping him across the face.

His head jerks to the side from the impact, a splotch of red covering his cheek.

Nixon licks his lip and slowly turns back to look at me. His light eyes, stormy and hard as stone, pin me in place. A red print colors his cheek; it’s so bright I can see it even in the dim light of the hallway.

My hand stings from the impact. I clench my fingers a few times, working through the pain. My heart is racing from the adrenaline, my breathing hard.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about,” I hiss quietly.

“Don’t I? Because I think I have a very clear idea of what is really going on here.”

“Like hell you do.” Then something else hits me. “Did you tell somebody?” I shove at his chest, panic slowly finding its way out of me. “Did you?”

“So eager to protect your lover?” Nixon lifts his brows mockingly, his lip tilting in a sneer. He takes me in from head to toe, disgust evident in his gaze.

My body shudders under his excruciating gaze. Dirty. That’s how he makes me feel. Dirty and worthless. Like I did something wrong, although just the idea...

I shake my head, trying to clear it because otherwise, the chances are I’m going to puke.

“You better keep your mouth shut, Cole,” I warn him.

“Or else?” He chuckles humorlessly. “You’ll sleep with the dean to make him forget about your little affair?”

“I’m not sleeping with anybody,” I defend. I can’t tell him the truth, but I don’t have to take his accusations either.

Not that I owe him any explanation at all.

“Didn’t look like that from my point of view.”

It’s like he’s enjoying it, taunting me, playing with my feelings, and having this secret to hold over my head.

I shake my head, done with this. Done with *him*.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

I try to step around him, but he gets in my way.

“Don’t worry, honey.” He smirks, and I want to slap him so badly just so I can wipe that smug smile off his face. “I didn’t say anything to anybody. Your dirty little secret is safe with me.”

His words sting, but I press my mouth in a tight line, refusing to give in to his jab.

“If I were you I wouldn’t get too comfy. Shit like that has a way of coming out when you least expect it.”

My whole body stills. “Is that a threat?”

“Just a reminder.”

I pull my hand out of his grip. “Well, you keep your reminders and your tongue to yourself, and we should be fine.”

With that, I leave, not once turning back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

YASMIN

“Here you go,” I say with a polite smile as I slide the drinks over the counter. “Two hot white chocolates with extra whip cream.”

The girls thank me and hand me the cash before leaving.

I wipe my hand on the towel next to me and tighten my ponytail, puffing a runaway strand out of the way.

“It’s really quiet tonight,” Monica comments when she comes out of her office at the back.

“It’s Thursday.” I shrug. It’s ten PM, and I have another hour on this shift before closing.

“I guess that explains it. You kids like to start partying early every chance you get.” Monica starts to chuckle, but instead, a yawn escapes her.

“You should go home, and I’ll close the shop,” I say, noticing, not even for the first time, how tired she looks. The bags under her eyes have grown bigger with each passing day.

Monica stifles another yawn. “Are you sure? I hate leaving you like that.”

“Positive. It’s quiet, and there isn’t much to do anyway.”

She reluctantly looks around the shop before nodding. “Well, if you’re sure.”

I shove her away lightly. “Go. I can take care of it.”

“Fine, fine.”

True to my prediction, the next hour drags slowly. Apart from a girl sitting in the corner—who’s been here for hours, mind you—with her headphones on, typing something furiously on her laptop as she throws down cups of coffee like tequila shots, and an older guy sitting on the high table, nobody new came.

I grabbed my own notebook and started working on my homework. Maybe if I begin early, I’ll go to bed at a decent hour.

Ten minutes before closing, my phone beeps with a message.

Callie: Come to Moore’s.

Me: Working.

Callie: You’re closing in a few minutes.

I roll my eyes. Of course, she knows when Cup It Up closes, I’d bet that girl would live here if it were possible.

Me: And then I have homework to finish.

Callie: Don't be a party pooper.

Callie: Come, it's just an hour.

I nibble at my lower lip, thinking. There is always so much to do, but I hate saying no to her. I always feel bad when I try to ditch my friends, but with my schedule there is barely any spare time to breathe, much less party.

My gaze falls on the notebook, my almost-finished homework staring back at me accusingly.

Sighing, I relent.

Me: Just ONE hour.

Callie: Yay!

Callie: We're by the pool tables. See you in a few.

It doesn't take me long to wrap up everything in Cup It Up, and close for the evening. The night is chilly so I wrap my scarf tightly around my neck, making sure to cover the lower half of my face, as I walk across campus to Moore's.

The bar is a local student hangout. They have really tasty food, cheap drinks, big screens, and pool tables, so it's not surprising that the place overflows with students all the time.

Although it's late January and freezing outside, there are still people mingling around.

In ten minutes, I'm entering the bar, warm air blowing in my face as soon as I open the door.

I recognize some faces as I move through the crowd of people going toward the back where the pool tables and bigger booths are located, and where I know I'll find Callie and the rest of the crew.

And sure enough.

"Yas!" Callie yells happily as soon as she sees me, throwing her hands in the air and almost kicking Hayden in the face in the process. "You're here!"

He wraps his arms around her from the back, nuzzling his face in her neck, effectively stopping her from moving. "Calm down, or you'll leave bruises, Angel."

"I told you I'd come, didn't I?" I shake my head at the two of them. They're so in love. If I didn't love them as much as I do, I'd find it obnoxious

to watch.

Callie's sitting on Hayden's lap because the booth is full. Then again, it doesn't take much to fill the space when you're hanging with football players. Those guys take extra space with their tall frames, wide shoulders, and all those muscles.

"You're tickling me," Callie protests, shoving Hayden away, and then turning her attention back to me. "With you, one can never be sure."

I know she doesn't mean anything by it, but her words sting nonetheless. It's not like I've consciously tried to avoid her; between classes and all my other obligations, it isn't easy to find the time, but it's even worse when she's spending all of her free time with Hayden—and the football team by extension—and I try my best to avoid them. A fact she isn't aware of—well, not entirely anyway. She knows I'm not too fond of athletes, but she doesn't know the reason behind it.

"Yeah, maybe you had different plans than hanging out with football players."

The hairs at the nape of my neck rise at his sugary, sweet words. I didn't think Nixon would be here—hell, a part of me sighed in relief when I hadn't seen him sitting at the table—but I should have known better.

Slowly, I turn to glare at him. "I'm here for my *friends*."

"Oh, I know all about the *friends* you're keeping."

My whole body stiffens more than I thought possible, every muscle tense. The idiot knows it and just smirks at me.

Díos, I want to stab him in the eye.

I'm not a violent person by any means, but something about Nixon Cole and that smirk of his brings out the worst in me.

I thought I was very clear the night the Blairwood Ravens were celebrating their championship win, but maybe he needs a reminder.

Since then, I've made a point of avoiding Nixon as much as possible, which wasn't that hard if we exclude that one class we share this semester. There I try my best to ignore him, which isn't as easy as I'd like. The guy craves attention, and he gets it.

Callie looks between the two of us with curiosity. "Am I missing something?"

I turn my back to Nixon, shutting him out before I do or say something I won't be able to take back, and give my full attention to Callie. "Just that Nixon is being an ass. But, nothing new about that."

I take in the booth, looking for a place to sit, but there isn't one. Nixon just took the last chair, putting the two pitchers I hadn't even noticed he's been carrying on the table.

Taking off my jacket and bag, I hand them to Callie. "I'll just go grab a chair and something to drink."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Callie offers, wiggling her way out of Hayden's arms, but I shake my head no. She looks too cozy for me to disturb.

"Nah, I'm good. It'll just take a few minutes."

As I move through the crowd of people that only seems to have grown since I got here moments before, I notice one table with an extra chair. Stopping, I ask the girls if they can hold it for me while I grab my drink at the bar and they agree.

I'm winded by the time I reach the bar. After spending the last few hours in an almost-deserted coffee shop, Moore's is loud and suffocating. Between the music blasting from the speakers, and people talking animatedly all around me, it's just too much.

The bar's also filled with people waiting to order, so I lean my elbows on the shiny dark counter and prepare to wait.

Tonight Mark is manning the bar. He sees me almost instantly, giving me the universal sign for just a minute, which I wave off. I don't mind waiting—anything that will keep me away from that table. I didn't want to come before I knew Nixon was here, and now knowing it, I want to go back even less.

The hour I promised Callie started ticking off the moment I entered Moore's. It's not my problem if the bar is so crowded I have to spend half the time just waiting for my drink.

"Yasmin! What's up, girl?" Mark asks once he finally comes to me. "Haven't seen you here in a while."

Mark is a sweetheart. We had a class together last semester, and he helped me study when I was stuck for a bit there. At five-ten, he's a few inches taller than me, his bleached blond hair is styled to perfection, and his famous hipster glasses, which he doesn't actually need although he refuses to admit it, are propped on the bridge of his nose as he smiles at me.

"Nothing much." I shrug with a smile. "Keeping busy as always. And tonight would be my roommate's fault. This semester is already kicking my ass, but my friend wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Good for her, you need to have more fun." His grin widens as he pats my hand.

“So they keep saying.”

“What will I get you? The usual?”

I look over the bar and the bottles hanging above it. I was thinking of going with a beer, but now I’m rethinking that choice. If I want to survive the next hour, I’ll need something stronger.

“How about a gin and tonic?”

His brows shoot up his forehead. He knows me too well. “You’re not messing around tonight, huh?”

“Let’s say I’ll need it if I want to survive this night,” I comment dryly.

Mark shakes his head. “One gin and tonic, coming right up.”

“Thanks, Mark,” I say after him, a smile on my face.

I’m about to grab my phone out of my pocket to do some mindless scrolling through social media when somebody whispers in my ear.

“What would the coach say if he saw you flirting with other guys?”

I jerk in surprise and turn around, shocked to find Nixon standing right there behind me. My eyes move up until they land on his. They’re glassy, and there is a flush to his cheeks I hadn’t noticed before; his bright blue irises are swallowed by his pupils.

“You’re drunk, Nixon,” I hiss quietly, so only he can hear me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

My stomach clenches with unease. I’m not sure what he’s up to, but I don’t like this one bit.

“Better question is, what are you doing, Yasmin?” He tries to reach for me but sways on his feet, losing his balance and falling over me. My hands shoot up, steadying him, as I curse him silently.

Nixon might be leaner than most of his teammates, but he’s no less heavy. And all those lean, warm muscles are now pressed against me.

He chuckles, making me narrow my eyes at him even further.

“What?”

Is he on something other than alcohol? He doesn’t seem like a guy who’d put his career at stake for something as foolish as drugs, but what the hell do I know?

“You’re cute when you curse me in Spanish.” Nixon reaches to brush his hand against my cheek, but ends up poking me in the eyes.

“You won’t think that once I rip you a new one,” I mutter, shoving his hand away. “And stop poking me.”

Idiota.

“See what I mean?” This time he manages to brush his hand over my cheek. My whole body stills as tingles spread underneath the skin he touched. “Such a shame all that spice is wasted on Coach.”

The warmth in my body turns into fire. I push him away, my cheeks burning with shame.

Niña tonta. You can't forget who he is. What he knows.

“You're drunk and don't know what you're saying.” I look around and find some people staring at us.

The panic returns in full force, my stomach clenching painfully with unease.

Did anybody hear what he said?

Just the thought of it makes me shiver. If anybody were to find out... No, I can't even go there.

“Am I?” His eyes grow hard as he glares at me. “Because I don't remember you trying to defend yourself.”

I push him back. Hard. Fuck this, fuck him.

“That's because I don't owe you an explanation,” I yell back at him. “You know what? I'm done with this.”

I'm getting out of here. I'll deal with Callie's wrath later, promise her a girls' night, anything just to get out of here. But I'm not staying here a second longer.

Leaving money on the counter along with the drink a confused Mark just left there, I go back to the booth and grab my things.

“I'm leaving,” I say, pulling my jacket on in a hurry.

“What?” Callie turns to me, a confused look on her face. “But you just got here.”

“Something... something came up.” I pick up my backpack. “I'm sorry, Cals, but I have to go.”

“Yasmin!” Nixon calls after me, but I don't turn to acknowledge him.

Callie looks over my shoulder and then back at me. I give her a pleading look, hoping she'll understand. Her face turns serious, but she nods.

“I'll see you later.” I dash between people, praying to God that the crowd will swallow me so I don't have to deal with Nixon again. Maybe he'll trip over his own feet, face-plant to the ground, and break his nose. That's exactly what he deserves, *cabrón*.

Just when I think I'm safe, somebody grabs my hand and pulls me to a stop.

“You can’t leave like that,” he grits angrily, pulling me to the side.

I’m not sure how he isn’t cold, because it’s even more freezing outside than when I came. And in my hurry to get out of there, I didn’t have a chance to zip my jacket or put on my scarf.

“I can, and I am,” I say, pulling my hand out of his. His hair is disheveled, and there is an almost wild look in his eyes. I don’t know what his problem is, and I don’t want to find out. All I want is to be left alone. “You don’t know shit that’s been going on, and besides, who the fuck do you think you are to judge me? What gives you the right? So fuck off and leave me the hell alone.”

I try to get around him, but Nixon doesn’t let me pass. Instead, he gets in my face. We’re so close our chests are brushing together, and I can feel his warm breath touch my skin.

“Oh, but you have a right to judge me? Because that’s all you’ve done since the moment we met. High and mighty Yasmin Hernandez is allowed to judge whoever she wants, while on the side she fucks the freaking coa—”

“Don’t you dare say it,” I yell at him, interrupting before he can finish the sentence. Panic is crawling at my insides. I’m losing it, but there isn’t anything I can do to stop this train wreck from happening.

I close my eyes, feeling the tears prickle behind my eyelids.

You will not cry. You will not...

“Oh no?” Nixon laughs, the sound echoing in the silent night. “Because the truth hurts, right? Truth is an ugly, unforgiving bitch. Tell me, is he your first one? Or was there somebody else? Is it a fetish of yours? Fucking forbidden men in position of power?”

Every single word he says is like a slap to my face. Only it somehow feels worse. I’d rather have him punch me than have to listen to his ugly, hurtful words one more second.

A sob rips out of me as something inside me breaks.

“He’s my fucking father, you asshole,” I shout, shoving him away.

I’m not sure who’s more surprised, him or me.

Nixon stumbles back, falling on his ass, his mouth hanging open while my hand flies to cover my equally gaping lips as the words I’ve never, not once, uttered out loud, ring in the night.

“Y-Yasmin, I...” Nixon says, trying to get up.

Shaking my head, the horror of what just happened, what I revealed, sets in, and I feel a lone tear fall down my cheek.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I turn on my heels and run. This time, Nixon doesn't try to follow me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NIXON

“What the hell was that yesterday?” Hayden asks as he enters my room early the next morning.

Groaning, I take the first thing that comes to hand—which turns out to be a football—and throw it at his head, but the asshole catches it. “Don’t you know how to knock?”

“What for? I’ve seen your naked ass plenty of times.”

He leans against the doorway and starts playing with the football, throwing it in the air and catching it. The sound of skin slapping against skin is like somebody’s stabbing me in the brain.

“I might have had somebody over.”

“Right,” he chuckles. “That would imply that you were able to walk yourself home last night, which if I remember correctly, you weren’t.”

He isn’t lying, that’s for sure. My head is throbbing painfully, and my mouth is so dry. I’m surprised I can even open it, much less talk.

“What do you want, Mom?”

Turning on my stomach, I burrow my head in the pillow and almost instantly regret it when my stomach starts to roll uncomfortably.

Christ, how much did I drink?

While I’ve never been a choir boy, I’ve also never indulged in excessive, can’t-remember-what-I-did, I-wanna-barf-my-stomach-out-of-my-body kind of drinking either. Oh, I tried it back in high school, but you learn pretty fast that if you really want to stay on the team and in tip-top shape, so that you can start, you can’t get drunk off your ass every weekend.

“What I want to know is what the hell’s going on with you? You’ve been off ever since we came back from break.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Bullshit,” he throws back instantly. His voice is so loud; I have to squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to breathe through the stab of pain that assaults my head, intensifying the throbbing behind my temples.

“Can you keep it quiet?” I protest, trying to massage the pain away.

“You don’t deserve better anyway.”

“What?” I ask, confused. There is something in his tone that has me rolling to my back so I can squint at him. “Why?”

What the hell happened last night? The whole evening is kind of blurry in

my mind. I know we went to Moore's for drinks and then...

Hayden looks at me for a moment. "You seriously don't remember?" He shakes his head like he can't believe it. "Dude, if I were you, I'd stay clear of Callie, 'cause she's pissed."

Callie?

"What for?"

Callie's never angry at me. Hell, I like to rub it in his face that she was my friend before the two of them started fooling around in the first place. That pisses him off like nothing else.

Hayden chuckles, but the sound lacks humor. "Because you chased Yasmin away, you dumbass. Callie barely got her out as it is. Seriously, man, you need to get your shit together."

With another knock against the door he turns and goes away while I stay lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling.

Yasmin.

What happened with...

The evening comes back to me in snippets, a slide of snapshots rolling through my brain.

Me drinking with the guys. Yasmin appearing. The bickering. Seeing her flirt with that bartender. Getting pissed and cornering her. Taunting her with her secret. Her running away. Me going after her.

He's my fucking father.

Her broken, empty eyes, and the tear sliding down her cheek.

My stomach rolls, and this time I know there's no stopping it. I barely get to my feet and across the hall to the bathroom before I throw the contents of my stomach up.

If only the shame was as easy to get rid of.

As I enter the classroom, my eyes scan the space. For once I'm actually early, so there aren't as many students in here just yet, but Yasmin's already sitting in her usual seat, her head hanging over her notebook as she scribbles something furiously.

Taking one deep breath, I enter and climb to her row. The nausea from earlier returns in full force, making me sweat.

I'm gripping the cups of coffee I picked up before coming here so hard, I'm surprised I don't break the paper and splash the hot liquid all over my hands. I'm a fucking mess, and I know it, but there is no way I could sit a few rows down from her without apologizing for last night.

He's my fucking father.

Yasmin's shoulders tense as my shadow falls over her, which is far from a promising start, but I wasn't expecting anything else.

Putting the cup on the desk, I slide it over the surface until it reaches the edge of her notebook. Slowly she lifts her gaze, those dark eyes meeting my face. The scowl I'm so familiar with is between her brows, like she knew all along who was coming.

"What is that?" Her voice is icy, but I don't deserve better.

God, I've been a grade-A asshole to her.

"An apology."

"I'm not interested," she dismisses me, returning to whatever she's been working on.

I should probably respect her wishes, tuck my tail between my legs and go. But I can't.

I don't care if it makes me a selfish asshole, I just can't leave knowing I made her cry last night. I can't leave because that empty brokenness swallowing her dark eyes will haunt me. It already does, and it's been mere hours.

Seriously, can things get more messed up?

There was something about Yasmin that drew me in from the very first moment I met her, but she dismissed me with one look. That's all it took for her to see through my shit. I found it endearing that after years of getting everything and everybody I wanted, there was this girl who didn't give a rat's ass about me. I couldn't charm her with my smile, my status on campus or my money. Somebody would probably say that the idea of a chase excited me, but it was more than that.

I wanted her to notice me.

I wanted her to look at me.

I wanted her to get to know me.

The real me.

The guy hiding behind the smile.

So instead of leaving like she asked me to, I slide down into the seat next to her.

Yasmin sucks in a gulp of air, her body going stiff by my side. I don't dare reach out to touch her since I'm not sure I'd leave with all my fingers intact.

"I'm sorry, Yasmin. Seriously. All the things I said. I—" I rub my hand over my face. My head is still hurting despite the two Advils I took once I got a grip on my queasy stomach.

"Do you seriously think this is the time and place?" she hisses quietly, interrupting me. Those dark eyes of hers pierce mine, a mask of cold and collected fury plastered on her face. "I asked you to leave me alone. After all, you owe me at least that."

She holds my gaze, hard and unnerving.

"Hey, Yas..." From the corner of my eye I see a girl coming closer. She stops when she sees me. "Am I interrupting something?"

A long, quiet moment passes between us. I'm waiting for... something, but it doesn't come, so I'm the first to concede.

"No," I say, getting to my feet. I scan the space, noticing that the classroom has filled up since I got here and that people are looking curiously in our direction. Giving one last glance at Yasmin, I shake my head. "I was just leaving."

CHAPTER NINE

YASMIN

“So... what did Mr. Quarterback want?” Heidi asks as she takes her seat, her eyes glued to Nixon’s retreating back.

I’m still fuming with barely suppressed anger. My fingers are wrapped so tightly around the pen in my hand I’m surprised it didn’t snap in two.

Who does he think he is? First, he assumes I’m some kind of whore that’s sleeping her way through college, and then he has the audacity to bring it up in a classroom full of students? Seriously?

The nerve of the man.

“Yas?”

“Huh?” I turn and only then realize Heidi has been talking to me. “What were you saying?”

She gives me a funny look. “Nixon? What did he want?”

“He...” My gaze falls on the coffee sitting on the desk in front of me. I wish I could have poured it over his head. But since he’s thankfully gone, I force myself to pick it up and tip it in her direction. “Came over to bring this as a thank you. For lending him my notes,” I lie since there is no way I’m telling her anything close to the truth.

Her brows rise. “I didn’t think you two knew each other.”

“Hmm... My roommate is dating his friend.”

I take a sip of the coffee, hoping it’ll prevent her from asking for details since I hate lying. The familiar taste of cinnamon spreads over my tongue as the warmth fills my belly.

I pull the cup back a little, and sure enough, it has the familiar Cup It Up logo on it. The smell of cinnamon is so strong I don’t have to bring it all the way to my nose to smell it. Just the way I like it.

How did he know?

“Callie, right?”

“Yup.” I let the P pop to fill in the silence, my thoughts still on that damn coffee.

He probably just asked whoever’s there to make my favorite.

Thankfully the arrival of Dr. Stevens saves me both from having to explain further and obsessing over Nixon. Leaving the coffee on the edge of my desk, I open a blank page in my notebook and immerse myself in listening about Shakespeare’s early work, writing down notes like my whole

life depends on it. In a way, it does.

“¿Qué tal las clases?”

“Classes are fine, Mamá. I’m really enjoying this semester’s selection, although there’s a lot of work to do,” I say absentmindedly as I scan the book in front of me. I was doing research for an essay just when Mom called me. It was a spur of the moment decision to study in my dorm room instead of the library, and I’m glad because otherwise I’d have missed her, and we don’t talk much as it is.

Between the two of us, we have such busy schedules it’s hard to keep track of what the other is doing, so we mostly communicate by leaving voice messages for one another.

“I’m so proud of you. You know that?” Mom asks, switching to English. Her thick Spanish accent warms something inside of me but at the same time makes my heart ache.

I’ve missed her.

Until I left for college, it’s always been just the two of us against the world. And while we had our disagreements, I always knew I could count on Mom to be there and love me in spite of everything. She never gave up on me, not even when I was at my worst.

“You only say it every time we talk, Mamá,” I tease, a smile curling my lips. “I know. Thank you for believing in me.”

Mom never went to college, and she takes great pride in knowing I’m going to one of the best universities in the country. When I was visiting during the holidays, she showed me off to the whole neighborhood, telling everybody about her smart daughter who’s in college.

I tried to brush it off, claiming it’s not a big deal, but she didn’t listen. So I kept quiet, pushing back the guilt I feel for lying to her. She can never find out the real reason how I got here because if she did, she would be crushed.

“Te amo, mí niña. But remember, you can’t be all about work. Are you making friends and having fun?”

“Ma...” I groan, already hating the direction in which this conversation is going, although I know she just wants what’s best for me.

“Don’t start with that tone, señorita,” she reprimands me, and I can see

her clearly in my mind. The scowl between her brows and her wiggling her finger at me. I've seen her do that so many times it's etched in my brain. "I know you're hardworking..."

"I learned it from the best."

She huffs off the compliment like she always does, but it's true. She's the most hardworking person I know, and without her, I wouldn't have made it half this far. "We Hernandez women have a tendency to take on more than we should just to show the world that we can."

"Ain't that the truth."

Somehow we've always been considered... less. For most things I had to work twice as hard as some of my friends to get the same acknowledgment. And once I finally got it, it was always a bittersweet win.

The same goes for my mom. So we took it upon ourselves to show everybody where to shove it and do better. Work harder.

"What I'm trying to say is, that it's okay to take a break sometimes," Mom says softly. "You don't want to overwork yourself. The human body can only take so much."

"I know, Mom. It's just..." I don't get to finish because the door to the room bursts open as Callie enters.

"Holy shit, how is it possible that it's getting co—" Callie says, her body shaking. She finally notices the phone plastered to my ear and whispers, "Oops, sorry."

I wave her off just as Mom asks, "What's that?"

"My roommate just came into the room," I explain.

"Oh, okay. I should get to work anyway. Say hi, and we'll talk soon. ¿Está bien?"

"Está bien, Mamá," I agree. "Te amo."

"Yo a tí también."

Ending the call, I leave my phone on the desk before turning my attention to Callie. She's taken off her jacket and is rubbing her hands together. "What are you doing here?"

She turns around as if she's looking for something. "Umm, this is still my room if I remember correctly."

I roll my eyes at her because this feels too much like that first conversation we had back in August. "What I'm trying to say is, you haven't been here much lately."

She lifts her brows. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

I take the pillow off my bed and throw it at her head. “You’re acting like a bitch, Cals.”

“I’ve learned from the best,” she says, laughing and throwing it back at me.

“Ha-ha-ha. No, seriously, what brings you here? Hayden piss you off or something?”

“No, I’m doing an intervention, that’s what I’m doing! I figured you’d be in the library with your nose stuck in a book or working or *something*, so I’d get a chance to corner you when you showed up later. But you ruined my plans, you know, being here and all...” She narrows her eyes at me. “What are *you* doing here?”

I spin in my chair and pick up the book. “Studying. Or I was, but my mom called.”

Callie crosses the room and pulls the book out of my hands. “Not anymore.”

“Hey, I have to...”

Once again, the door abruptly opens, interrupting me.

“Please tell me I’m not late!” Chloe says as she barges into the room. She’s panting, her cheeks flushed, and her dark curls are a mess.

“Right on time!” Callie reassures her. She throws my book on her bed and goes to her closet.

“Good, I was running down to grab our order.”

Only then do I notice the spicy smell spreading through the room. My stomach growls, reminding me I forgot to grab lunch between my classes earlier.

I watch Callie squat down, her face turning into a grimace just for a moment as she does, but as always, she ignores it as she pulls something from the bottom before standing up.

“What is all of this?”

Callie turns around and lifts a familiar bottle in the air. “I told you. An intervention.”

“It looks like tacos and tequila,” I deadpan. And now I’m really hungry. My stomach growls loudly, confirming it to the whole room.

“What was that?” Callie’s eyes narrow at me.

“It sounded like a bear.”

“That was my stomach, you dumbass.” Sighing, I shake my head. “Why are we having an intervention again?”

“Because apparently, you’re two, and we can’t expect you to take care of yourself.”

“It’s been a long day.”

I grab a stack of cups that I keep in my drawer and pull it out. Together we sit down on the floor. The space is small, but we squeeze together and start opening the boxes.

The first bite of tacos has me moaning loudly.

“So good,” I murmur as I chew. I haven’t had decent Mexican food since I got back from home. Not that anything can actually compare to Mom’s cooking.

“I know, they’re my favorite to order from.”

“You still do that?” Chloe asks.

When Callie first got here, she rarely left the dorm except to go to her classes and to come to Cup It Up. We joked that she’s on a first-name basis with all the delivery guys around campus and has them in favorites on her phone.

“Hey,” Callie says, elbowing her, “I’ll have you know that I mostly go to the cafeteria now, and we occasionally cook.”

“She isn’t hiding anymore,” I mock-whisper.

Callie huffs. “I was never hiding.”

As one, Chloe and I turn to Callie, giving her who-are-you-shitting looks. Her cheeks flush a bit. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“Cooking, huh? That sounds cozy.” Chloe grabs another taco while I work on opening the tequila bottle and pouring some for each of us.

“Cooking, heating up pre-made stuff Hayden’s grandma made, it’s all the same, right?”

We all burst into laughter at that.

“Yeah, right.”

“Keep telling yourself that, chica.”

As our laughter slowly dies, I look at my two friends. Things have been really hectic since this semester started, but not just that. Things have *changed*. And they’ll keep on changing. It would be so easy to blame everything on circumstances, but I have to admit it was partly my fault too.

“I really missed you guys.”

I haven’t even realized how much until this very moment. Sitting on the floor of our room, drinking shitty tequila, eating tacos, and talking about mundane things. I missed these moments, missed my friends.

Callie wraps her arms around me. “We missed you too.” Pulling back, she slaps me over the head.

“Ouch, what was that for?” I rub at the back of my head.

“That was a reminder that you have to hang out with us more.”

“I know,” I sigh. “Things have just been so busy.”

“You were busy last semester too,” Chloe chips in, sipping on her drink.

“And that doesn’t explain why you ran away so suddenly yesterday.”

Here it was, the real reason for the *intervention*. I should have known better than to assume they’d let it go. My friends don’t miss a thing.

“Did something happen with you and Nixon?” Chloe asks, a frown between her brows. “I saw you guys talking at the bar.”

“He...” I stop, nibbling at the edge of my cup. Did he tell them something? Do they know... No, he wouldn’t have. Right? “He was just being a jackass as usual, that’s it. And I was too tired to deal with his shit.”

Callie shakes her head, her lips pressed in a firm line. “I haven’t seen him like that, well, ever. He got so drunk he could barely walk. Both Hayden and Prescott had to help him get his ass home.”

“That’s so weird.” I turn around to Chloe, who just shrugs. “You’d think he’d be happy, with the Ravens winning the national championship and all.”

“It’s not that. But something else has been bugging him, I’m sure. I just don’t know what. He’s disappearing over the weekend without saying a word to anybody, and when he’s here he’s all grumpy and gloomy.”

My ears perk up at the mention of that, the night when I heard the end of his phone call ringing in my ears. *Is he going to visit that girl? Julie? No, Jade. Is that it? Is it something about her that has him all messed up like that?*

Taking a sip of my drink, I keep my mouth shut. I push the thoughts of Nixon and that phone call out of my mind. It’s none of my business. I don’t know what his deal is, and I don’t care as long as he keeps quiet about what he knows about me.

“Do you know anything?” Callie’s question startles me. When I lift my head, I find both of my friends waiting curiously for my answer.

“Me?” I ask, pointing at my chest innocently. “What would I know? Except that he’s always been a jackass.”

Callie narrows her eyes at me. “Don’t be like that, he’s not that bad.”

“Says you.”

“You’re just so harsh toward him.”

“And every other jock,” Chloe points out, her brows raised. “What’s with that?”

I wipe my mouth with a napkin and get to my feet.

“I don’t like jocks, that’s all.” I see them exchange a silent glance. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an essay to work on.”

CHAPTER TEN

NIXON

“Is that all you’ve got? If you keep slacking like that, your legs will turn into pasta during the off-season,” Zane ribs as Prescott slowly lifts out of the squat, his fingers gripping the barbell propped over his shoulder so hard his knuckles turn white.

“Fuck. Off,” Prescott pants, legs shaking, sweat dripping over his face. It’s his fifth set, and he’s already gone over his usual lifting weight.

“I’m not sure I heard you correctly? You want another set?”

“You’re an asshole, Zane.”

“Asshole who’ll help you get better for next season. Now shut up and finish.”

I watch them as I work my chest and arms on the other side of the room. Prescott does two more slow, painful reps. At this point, his whole body is shaking, and once he’s done, Zane helps him get the weight off.

Prescott doubles over, his hands gripping his thighs. “I think I’m going to puke.”

“Don’t be a sissy, Wentworth.” Zane throws a towel at him, and then his eyes are on me. “Why are you smiling like that over there? You’re too chipper to be doing a proper job.”

He crosses over to me, checks the weights, and after adjusting them, he slaps me on the shoulder. “Let’s see you now.”

Shaking my head, I do as he says. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

“Hey, you guys asked me to join you.”

“To work out with us, not torture us, you motherfucker.”

He lifts his hands in surrender. “Fine, do it your way, but don’t come complaining to me afterward.”

Zane takes the machine next to mine and starts working on his legs. While football season is over, hockey is still in full swing, and they’re killing it.

More insults are thrown this way and that as we go through the exercises. As time passes, the gym starts to empty until the three of us are the only ones left.

Once I’m done for today, I get off the machine and wipe my face. Opening a water bottle, I check my phone. Dozens of different messages and notifications have appeared since we got here, but I ignore them until one in

particular catches my attention, knocking the air out of my lungs.

Smalls: Sorry, it's been a long day. Talk tomorrow?

"You done?" My head snaps up at Prescott's question. He wipes the sweat off his beet red face as he waits for my answer.

Locking the phone, I turn to my friends. "You know what? I'll do a few miles on the treadmill." They give me curious looks, but don't comment further. We pump our fists in goodbye. "See you later."

The message is still on my mind as I pick up my things and walk to the row of treadmills on the other side of the gym.

Jade has been awfully quiet this past week, and I was starting to worry. I wanted to go home to visit, but classes have picked up, and although the football season is officially over, I can't skip classes or let my grades slip. That would go against all the promises I made, and I can't do it. I can't disappoint her. But it seems that no matter what I do, which path I take, somebody will always end up hurt.

I hop on and start with a slow walk as I always do.

I haven't even been at it for a minute when the door to the gym opens. My head snaps up, and I almost fall off the treadmill when I see Yasmin standing in the doorway.

"Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't..."

Yasmin looks almost as startled as I feel. One foot inside, the other out. It's like she's stuck and doesn't know if she wants to enter or run the hell away.

"Stay," I say before I can think better of it, but I don't want to risk her running away before I can even think to open my mouth.

This is the first time we've been together since I tried apologizing to her, and she told me to leave. Since then, I've tried to respect her wishes, and except for our class together, I haven't seen her.

But I wanted to. Oh, how I wanted to. That night is still haunting me, and no matter how much I try to reason that I'm doing the right thing by respecting her wishes, I can't forget about it. Can't let go.

"I..." she starts but stops. I can practically see her brain work as she tries to decide if she should stay or leave.

Finally she nods and enters. The sound of the door closing echoes in the otherwise quiet room.

Yasmin moves closer, but still makes sure to leave enough space between us. I watch from the corner of my eye as she steps on the treadmill and plays

with a few buttons before the slow hum of the machine joins mine.

“I didn’t know you ran.”

The words come out before I can stop them. She looks at me, and then quickly turns away.

“You don’t know a lot about me.” Her voice is soft, but I can see that stubborn lift of her chin, as if she’s daring me to contradict her.

“And you do about me?” I shoot right back.

Yasmin’s head snaps to look at me. Those dark eyes of hers, that always seem to see more than they should, stare at me silently for a minute. I expect her to snap back at me; after all, that’s what we’re best at, taking until there is nothing else left to give. But she surprises me with a slight tilt of her head. “Touché.”

After that we’re both quiet. I switch from a fast walk into a full-on run, and after a while she does the same. I’m not sure how long we’re at it, I don’t bother to look down at the time, just let my body do the thing it knows how to do the best.

My eyes are boring into one spot on the wall as I force my body to move. My muscles scream from exertion, but my heart welcomes the physical pain.

The silence is comforting, but at the same time, there is also this tension between us. All the things that I want to say, but can’t. All the questions I want to ask her, but know won’t be received well.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The beeping of the machine breaks me out of my thoughts. My breathing is elevated, and I can feel the sweat dripping off my face. I look around and notice that Yasmin slowed down her jog to a slow walk to cool down.

Taking the towel off the handle, I wipe my face and decide to call it a night too.

My legs feel like noodles once I step off the treadmill, exhaustion finally setting in. I grab my water bottle and empty half of it. For the first time all night my eyes fall on the watch around my wrist.

When did it get so late? It feels like I just got here, but it’s already close to midnight.

The door squeaks open, and my head snaps up just to see Yasmin slipping outside.

“Yasmin, wait.” She stops but doesn’t turn around. “Are you going to the dorm?”

“Yeah.”

Throwing the towel over my shoulder, I grab my things and go after her. “I’ll walk you.”

She looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes narrowed into tiny slits. I swear I can see smoke coming from her ears. “I don’t remember...”

“It’s not up for discussion,” I say, not giving her time to finish. “I either walk you, or I’ll walk after you. Take your pick.”

She stares at me, clearly irritated, but I don’t back down. Not on this. Blairwood might have a small and relatively safe campus, but it’s too late for her to walk around all by herself.

“Fine,” she finally agrees. “Five minutes.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

YASMIN

When I get out of the changing room, Nixon is already there, leaning against the wall, leg propped on the hard surface, waiting for me. It's like he's expecting me to run away without him. He wouldn't be completely wrong, because the idea might have crossed my mind.

His head snaps up when he hears the door open, eyes landing on mine as he pushes off the wall. "Ready to go?"

My hand is gripping the door like my life depends on it. I force myself to loosen my grip and let go.

"You don't have to, I'm capable of walking myself back to the dorm."

"I didn't say you weren't, but this isn't up for discussion," he grits through clenched teeth and pulls open the door for me.

I'm not sure what's with this whole situation. The other night he didn't give a rat's ass if I walked home alone or not. Why bother now?

I step out, a shiver going through my whole body when we step into a cold night. Burrowing deeper into my scarf, I wrap my arms more tightly around myself.

Turning around on the balls of my feet, I face him. "You're infuriating."

"And you aren't any better."

We stare at each other for a while. "Let's just go."

Not waiting for his answer, I start walking to my dorm. It's an easy fifteen-minute walk from the gym to the dorm, but I know if I hurry, I can make it in ten.

The campus is mostly quiet, without a soul in sight. After years of living in a city which is always buzzing with activity and life, it's hard to get used to this... stillness. It feels unnatural.

When I see my building in front of me, I sigh in relief. Just a little while longer, and I'll be safely inside.

"We're here, you're free to go," I say just as Nixon wraps his fingers around my hand to stop me from going inside.

"Yasmin."

His voice is low and rough as he says my name, making the fine hairs at the nape of my neck rise.

I look down, my eyes glued to his fingers wrapped around my wrist. They're long and lean, his grip sure. He isn't wearing gloves so I can see that

the skin on his knuckles is reddish and rough from the cold. I shouldn't be able to feel his touch, not with all the layers between us, but I can. The roughness of his fingertips, the warmth of his skin.

"What?"

He swallows, as if he's preparing himself to get the words out. "I know you said you don't want to talk about it..."

"Then don't," I cut him off before he can finish the sentence. I'm in no mood to discuss the fuckup that's our... relationship.

"I can't. I need you to know I'm sorry for everything I said that night. I was drunk, but that's no excuse. What I said..." He shakes his head. "It was mean and spiteful, and completely out of line. I shouldn't have said it."

"No, you shouldn't have." I pull my hand out of his, but even so I can still feel the weight of his touch.

I turn my back on him, not wanting to look at his haunted eyes, but something holds me in place, not letting me go. Not just yet anyway.

"You didn't say anything to anybody, did you?"

There is a moment of silence, but I don't turn around.

"No," he finally says, breaking the quiet. "I didn't say anything."

I close my eyes, my shoulders sagging as relief floods through me. "Good. That's... good."

"I still can't believe that Coach is..."

"Don't say it," I say, stopping him before he can finish. I don't want to hear those words uttered out loud once again. Saying them that one time was one time too many. "Just... don't."

"Fine, I'm not... I won't say anything. To anyone."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." There is something in his voice that has me turning my head to look at him. His face is hard, and there is darkness creeping behind his light eyes that I haven't seen before. He chuckles, but the sound lacks amusement. "I might know a thing or two about asshole fathers. Your secret's safe with me."

I remember what Callie said the other day.

I haven't seen him like that, well, ever. But something's been bugging him. I just don't know what.

Is that it? Is he having some family problem he's been keeping away from everybody else? Is that what's been keeping him on edge?

"Nixon..." I start, but stop, not knowing what to say. And even if I did,

I'm not sure I should. Not when asking would give him the right to do the same with me, and I'm not about to share my secrets with anybody. Not even somebody who's privy to part of them.

Nixon shakes his head, offering me a small smile. "Go inside, Yasmin." He tips his chin toward the dorm, pushing his hands into his pockets. "It's getting cold."

Closing my mouth, I nod and take a step back. "Goodnight, Nixon."

"Night, Yasmin."

"Oh, look who finally decided to pick up her phone!"

I laugh at the irritation I hear in my friend's voice. "It's good to hear you too, Grace."

"It would have been better if you'd have picked up that phone more often! I was about to go to the police and file a missing person report."

"And who did you think kidnapped me?"

"How the hell should I know? We haven't spoken in so long, you'd be lucky if I'd have been able to give your description to the cops."

"You're exaggerating."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Whatever, I'm not playing this game like we're five. Tell me, was your kidnapper at least hot? Maybe he had you tied to your bed all this time, so you weren't able to pick up the damn thing and call."

The absurdity of the picture has me laughing even harder.

"What? No, of course not. I'm busy. With college. You know, that thing where you have to go to classes, and study and work, because suddenly you're an adult with obligations and responsibilities and..."

"Can't say I do," she says dryly.

I met Grace a few years back at the community center we attended in New York. She was sick for a while and needed to catch up on her studies, so I helped her. As they say, the rest is history. Although she's a year younger, something between us clicked, and we'd become inseparable. Until now.

"Not until next year. Get ready to pull out your big girl panties."

I hear her chuckle on the other side of the line.

“I miss you, Yas,” she says softly.

“Miss you too, Gracie. How are things back home?”

I listen as she tells me about her brother and sister-in-law and their kids, as well as the people we both know from the center.

“I stopped by your place.”

That grabs my attention. Grace did occasionally stop by my house, but never if I wasn't home. “Did you?”

“Yeah, I saw your mom, and she invited me for dinner.”

My stomach grumbles in protest. “Don't tell me that,” I whine. Seriously, there isn't a better cook than Mom, and just the thought of any of her specialties has my mouth-watering. Not that the food here is bad, but it's a far cry from Mom's homemade cooking.

“That bad?”

“Not bad, just not the same.”

“I really can't wait for next year.”

“You'll remember this conversation in a few months when you'll be standing in line in the cafeteria, and somebody steals the last plate of whatever you want to eat from under your nose.”

“It can't be that bad.”

“I wouldn't count on it.” We grow silent for a minute. “What about you? How are you doing?”

“I'm fine.”

Her answer is fast, automatic. The same one I've been hearing for way too long, and she can't fool me with her bullshit. But instead of calling her out on that, which I know won't result in anything good, I change tactics. “Any cute boys in the picture? Did you get a date for prom?”

She sighs loudly. “Now you sound like Sienna. Hell, even J.D.'s been nagging me about that.”

If her brother is looking forward to Grace dating, things have to be really bad.

“Grace...” I try, my voice soft, but it only serves to piss her off.

“No, we're not talking about it. I don't have a date, and I'm not planning to go to the prom.”

“Okay, okay.”

“I need to concentrate on keeping my grades up, dance, and graduating. Then come fall, we'll be in the same place again.”

Maybe that's what she needs. To move away, start fresh in a place

nobody knows her. A place that won't be a constant reminder of all the bad memories.

"Maybe you should come visit. Change of scenery and all that," I say before I can think better of it. Yes, I have a full schedule, but I'll find time for her. Especially if it'll help her take her mind off of things. "My roommate's sleeping over at her boyfriend's half the time anyway. She won't mind lending you her bed for a weekend."

Grace thinks about the suggestion for a moment. "That could be fun."

"Right? Talk to your brother, and if he wants, he can call me."

"Are you going to pick up?"

"Ha-ha-ha. I'll try my best." I see the sign for Cup It Up. "Hey Grace, I have to go. I'm just about to get to my job. Talk soon?"

"Promise?" There is uncertainty in her voice that has me stopping for a moment.

"Promise. You think about what I said, okay?"

"Sure."

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up just as I pull the door to the coffee shop open. I quickly change into my work shirt and get out front to start my shift, all while thoughts of my best friend keep wandering through the back of my mind. Is she really okay?

CHAPTER TWELVE

NIXON

“Fuck this.” I let the book fall into my lap and tilt my head back. Instead of landing on the pillow, I not so gently bang it against the wall. Sharp pain spreads through my skull, but it has nothing on the pain I’ve been suffering for the past two hours trying to study.

Deciding I need a break, and something to eat, I throw the book to the side and get up. As soon as I step into the hallway, I hear somebody shout from downstairs, followed by the sound of slashing metal. “Take that, fucker!”

Taking two steps at a time, I get to the ground floor, where the noise is louder, and go straight to the living room where I know everybody is at.

“You were saying?”

That voice.

The hair at the nape of my neck rises as I recognize it. Soft and husky with just a slight accent to make it sound mysterious and sexy. An undertone of sarcasm that’s all too familiar.

Slowing my step, I stop at the doorway and look inside. The room is filled with people—my teammates, their girlfriends, and friends. Considering our usual parties, this is a small group, but they still take almost all the sitting space and then some.

“Beginner’s luck,” Emmett scoffs as everybody laughs at him. His girlfriend, Katherine, is leaning over the couch and consoling him. “I demand a rematch.”

“Don’t be a sore loser, big guy,” Yasmin teases him, a bright smile on her lips as she high fives Katherine behind Emmett’s back.

“Is there a party, and why haven’t I been invited?” I ask nobody in particular.

Heads turn toward me, Yasmin’s included. Our eyes meet across the room and hold. Time seems to slow down as we stare at each other, but it couldn’t be more than a few seconds. My lips tip in a grin. Her eyebrows rise in a question, but she tilts her head in silent greeting.

Things have been better since the night I walked her home. I’m not sure what changed, but it did. I could feel it. The air wasn’t as tense when we were in the same room any longer. And Yasmin isn’t always scowling at me anymore. Well, not with real irritation anyway.

“Look who finally decided to grace us with his presence! Did you get your beauty sleep, Cinderella?” Prescott taunts, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Sleeping Beauty, asshole. Cinderella is the poor one.”

He shakes his head at me. “There’s something really disturbing in the fact that you know that.”

“What’s disturbing is the fact that you two assholes are even discussing it,” Hayden says from behind me, throwing a beer at Prescott. Caught off guard, the can almost falls on the floor, but he catches it at the last second.

We laugh at his fumbling, and I grab a beer for myself. “Thanks for the invite, bro. It’s not like this is my house or anything.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Don’t be a little bitch, Cole.”

“The only little bitch I know…”

“Boys.” Callie comes between us, wrapping her arms around Hayden. “Are we seriously doing this?”

“No idea what you’re talking about, Cals,” I say, making sure to give her my most innocent smile.

She shakes her head. “You know your charm doesn’t work on me, Nix.”

“So you’d like to think.” I wink at her, which earns me an elbow to the gut.

“You were saying?” Hayden asks, tightening his grip on his girlfriend.

I burst into laughter as I watch his grumpy mug leaning over her shoulder and scowling at me. It’s so funny to mess with him. “That your girlfriend likes me better. Which is the truth.”

Callie glares at me, shaking her head. Deciding to ignore me, she turns to Hayden. “Did you order that chicken thing I love?”

Hayden keeps glaring at me a few moments longer as if he’s trying to prove his point before turning his attention to Callie.

“Of course I did, Angel.” He brushes his lips against her temple, just over the scar that runs down the left side of her face.

“Pussy whipped,” I cough, which earns me a punch to the shoulder, this time from Callie. “Hey, what’s this today? Did I suddenly turn into a punching bag?”

“Only when you’re acting like a douche.”

“Just calling it like I see it.”

This time when she tries to punch me, I see it coming, and duck at the last second. I go for the couch, where Emmett is still demanding a rematch from

Yasmin. Grabbing a controller from the coffee table, I throw myself on the couch.

“You think you’re so good, huh?” I ask Yasmin, who just lifts a brow, clearly amused. “Good, let’s see what you’ve got.”

I step outside, enjoying the bite of the cool, night air on my heated skin. Zane yells something in the living room, at which Hayden laughs. They bicker for a while like an old married couple, and I can’t stop the smile forming on my lips.

Leaning against the wall, I enjoy the quiet and solitude for a while.

A moment.

That’s all I need.

Just a moment for myself, and then I’ll go back inside.

When I decided to take a break from studying, this wasn’t what I had in mind, but it was exactly what I needed. A relaxing night, and shooting the shit with the guys so I can forget about everything else.

The temptation to go upstairs and check my phone is still there, but I push it at bay. Just tonight. I can have one night, can’t I? It feels selfish, but between studying and keeping up with our off-season training, I’ve been going nuts as it is.

The door squeaks open, startling me.

I turn around and come face to face with the last person I expected to find.

Yasmin’s eyes grow wide when she sees me standing in the dark.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ll...” She starts to turn around to go back inside, but something inside of me protests the thought. I don’t want her to go. Not just yet.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I joke.

Yasmin stops in her tracks, looking at me over her shoulder. She’s dressed casually, jeans, sweatshirt, and socks with a little heart pattern on them. Her hair is pulled on top of her head in one of those messy bun thingies, with a few stubborn curls framing her makeup-free face.

Beautiful. That’s one word that has always come to my mind from the very first moment I met her. Effortlessly beautiful.

Something drew me to her from the moment I laid eyes on her. I'm not sure if it's the soft lines of her face, those deep eyes that seem to see all the way to the bottom of your soul, the fullness of her lips, or that sass of hers that drives me insane. Whatever it is, it mesmerizes me.

She mesmerizes me.

"I didn't know you were out here." Yasmin offers me an apologetic smile. She's standing in the doorway, her hand gripping the doorknob.

It's just like that night in the gym. Like she doesn't know if she wants to stay or go.

She might be unsure, but I'm not.

"No need to apologize. Stay."

Yasmin seems to mull it for a moment before finally nodding her head and closing the door behind herself. A soft *thud* echoes in the night, sounding almost final. Yasmin crosses the small porch until she's standing at the very edge of it by the railing, her arms wrapped around herself.

"You should have worn a jacket, it's still cold."

"I just needed to..." She stops, as if she's looking for the right word.

"Breathe?" I offer softly.

Yasmin turns to me, her wide eyes locking with mine, an unexpected understanding passing between us.

"Something like that. What about you? Any specific reason why you're freezing outside?" A teasing smile tips her lips. "Needed to cool down after I beat your ass? Twice, if I may add."

I narrow my eyes at her. "You have to gloat, don't you?"

Emmett can think it's beginner's luck all he wants, but the girl has some serious moves when it comes to the PlayStation controller, I'll give her that.

"This is the only chance I'll get, so yeah, I have to gloat."

"Of course you do," I say dryly, but there is no stopping the chuckle that escapes me.

Slowly the laughter dies, and comfortable silence stretches between us. Inhaling deeply, I close my eyes and resume my position against the wall.

If you told me a few weeks ago we could just stand and enjoy the quiet together, I'd tell you you were full of shit, but somehow we are.

There is the faint sound of the game they're still playing inside, music coming from one of the nearby houses, an owl hooting somewhere in the night. Still, even with all that it's somehow peaceful.

I embrace the feeling open-heartedly, reveling in it.

Yasmin sighs heavily, making my eyes fly open. Her head is tilted back as she watches the stars illuminating the dark night sky. Her arms are wrapped around herself as she rubs at her forearms to keep herself warm.

She must feel me watching her because she whispers, “I think I should go, it’s getting late.”

I have no idea what time it is, but it’s probably been hours. We played the game until the food came, and then we played some more, joking and throwing insults at one another. At some point, Maddox came down from his cave and connected some shit so more of us could play at the same time.

“Did you drive?”

She nods her head. “I was at Bright Haven when Callie called.”

“Bright Haven?” My brows furrow in confusion. The name sounds familiar, but I’m not sure from where.

“The community center, I volunteer there.”

Community center, right.

And, of course, she volunteers. I’m not even surprised. She’s completely selfless and always on the move.

I take a step forward, closing the distance between us. Although she’s on the taller side, she has to tilt her head back to be able to look me in the eyes.

“Do you ever take a moment to breathe? To just be?” I ask her softly.

“I’m doing that now, aren’t I?”

“You know what I mean.”

We stare at each other for what seems like a lifetime. From up close like this I can see a few gold speckles surrounding her right iris. They’re so small they’re barely noticeable.

“If I stop for too long, all the things I’ve been trying to keep at bay will catch up to me, and that’s the last thing I want, so I keep moving forward, hoping they’ll stay where they belong, forgotten in the past.”

“How bad can it be?”

“You know one of my secrets, you tell me.”

I don’t have to ask her to explain what she means. I know who she’s talking about. Her father. My fucking coach. It’s still hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that the two are one and the same. What happened between them to make their relationship as strained as it is? Is he the reason she’s so closed toward football players? Or is there something more? And the most important question of them all, how bad could it be if the truth got out?

“I should go back inside and say goodbye.”

Yasmin tries to walk around me, but I stop in front of her, blocking her path. “You’re not so bad when you stop scowling at me all the time, Hernandez.”

Something flashes across her face, but it’s gone before I can decipher what it was. Her lips tip upward. The smile is small, but it’s there. For me. “You’re not so bad either, Cole.”

This time, when she tries to walk inside, I let her go.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NIXON

Hands wrap around my forearm, pulling me back. “I’m not letting you slip through my fingers now.”

My whole body stiffens, going on alert, but I relax as soon as I recognize the voice.

“Something you wanna tell me, Cals?” I look down at her.

“There are a lot of things I want to tell you, but first you’re buying me coffee.”

I lift my brows but let her drag me after her. “No Hayden to bully into doing your bidding? Or did you finally come to your senses and decide to leave his grumpy ass?” She swats me over the head. By now I should see it coming, but she manages to surprise me every time. “Ouch, what was that for?”

“Being an ass, per usual.”

I rub at the back of my neck. “If you keep at it, you’ll give me a concussion.”

“Maybe you should try to be less of a smarty pants, and I wouldn’t have to.”

“Of course it’s my fault.”

“Of course it is,” she agrees readily. “Where were you this weekend?”

Her tone may be casual, accompanied by an innocent bat of her eyelashes, but I don’t let it fool me.

“Around.”

“Not at the house.”

“There is more to around than being at the house.”

“True.” Her fingers dig more into my forearm. “So where were you?”

I plaster my most charming smile onto my face. “What? Keeping tabs on me now, Mom?”

Callie gives me a look that conveys her thoughts without her having to voice them—*I see what you’re doing, and you can’t fool me.* “I’m just curious. Usually you’re at the house, if you’re not hooking up with somebody. But even then, it’s just that, a hookup, ending with you doing a walk of shame in the middle of the night to sleep in your own bed. So, color me curious.”

I force a laugh out, although she hit a little too close to home. Ignoring

her non-question question, I ask instead, “Married life is so boring you have to live vicariously through me?”

“I’ll give you married life.” Callie shoves me away and stumbles in the process, almost ending on her ass. We both laugh as I catch her.

“You were saying?”

“I love my life, thank you very much. And Hayden keeps me up long into the night, so I know you didn’t come back home.”

“He ain’t doing something right if you can stay up and wait for me,” I mutter, but of course it doesn’t pass unnoticed by Callie. She starts toward me, but I lift my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’ll shut up.”

She gives me a warning glare. “You better.”

“So if your life’s so good,” I start carefully, “what’s with this sudden obsession to meddle in mine?”

“Can’t a friend be interested in you?”

“Sure can.”

“Then why are you avoiding my questions?”

“I—” I stop in my tracks when I see the familiar window and the sign hanging on the side of the door. A group of students is just coming out of Cup It Up, all of them carrying the familiar cup with their logo on it as they chat away.

“C’mon, I need my fix.” Callie tugs at my hand, startling me, but I snap out of it and follow after her.

“God, is there a thing like coffeholic? Because if there isn’t I’ll demand they add it to the dictionary, along with your photo just below the definition.”

“The word you’re looking for is cofftastic. You know, once I get my fix, that is.”

The bell over the door rings as Callie pushes open the door and enters, me in tow. Yasmin lifts her head and looks toward the door. I suck in a breath as our eyes meet, gazes hold. It feels like I haven’t seen her in weeks, although it’s just been a few days.

Then she blinks, and the moment is gone.

“What are you two doing here?” Yasmin asks, her attention on Callie. The tip of her tongue slides out and over her lower lip. Transfixed, I follow the movement. Her full lips are bare; no lip gloss or anything for Yasmin. There is a natural pout to them, and they just beg to be kissed.

“I found him at the administration building and forced him to buy me coffee. You know, before he sneaks off and disappears on us once again.”

Callie gives a pointed look to Yasmin. “It seems like it’s a trend around here or something.”

Yasmin’s eyes meet mine, a guilty look crossing her face before she turns away, avoiding both me and Callie.

“Or something,” Yasmin mutters.

I have a feeling I know what sneaking around Callie is referring to when it comes to Yasmin. Doesn’t she know? Is the fact that Coach is Yasmin’s father such a big secret she didn’t even share it with Callie? What the hell does she think she’ll do, go around and announce it to the whole school?

Then again, who am I to judge? I have my own secrets safely stashed away.

Yasmin’s gaze returns to me. I’m not sure if she can see the questions on my face or not. Most likely, she just chooses to ignore it.

“So... what can I get you two?”

Callie mutters something under her breath, but I’m too transfixed by her friend to pay her any attention. She places her order, and then I do the same.

Yasmin nods and goes straight to business. I think I even see her shoulders rise as she exhales before getting to work.

Callie stands in front of the glass display, looking at all the goodies.

“You wanna order something?”

“Well, now that you’re asking...”

She places an order for some kind of cupcake just as Yasmin comes back with our coffees, plain black for me, some kind of bubbly frappe or something for Callie. I hand her a twenty, waving off the change.

Callie is just about to say something when the bell chimes again, drawing Yasmin’s attention to the new customers.

“Talk later,” Yasmin offers apologetically, although she doesn’t seem sorry. Not in the slightest. Saved by the bell. If only I were that lucky.

Callie drags me toward a table all the way in the back.

“You and Yas seem to be getting along better,” Callie comments as she sits down. She takes the lid off the cup, adds another packet of sugar, and stirs the contents of her cup.

“I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work.”

Callie looks at me through her eyelashes and bats them innocently. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Turn that angel’s face to Hayden because he’s the only one who’s buying it, love.”

“Fine,” she huffs, giving up on all pretense. “You like her, and she seems to be warming up to you.”

“And you concluded all that from less than five minutes of us being civil to one another without actually talking about anything?”

She puts her elbows on the table and leans toward me. “I concluded that after the game night at the house.”

Game night, of course. I guess it was just a matter of time before she brought it up.

“And then you say I’m never home.”

“You’re evading,” she sing-songs, a smug smile curling her lips.

“I’m not—” The look in her eyes has me lifting my arms in surrender. “Fine. We might have found...” I stop, choosing my next words carefully. “Some common ground, but I wouldn’t go as far as to say she’s warming up to me. Yasmin’s just not biting my head off every chance she gets.”

There, hopefully that will shut her up. My hands fall by my sides, and I lean back into my chair.

“You didn’t say you don’t like her.”

“What?”

“You didn’t say you don’t like her,” Callie repeats, a smug smile spreading over her lips.

Huh... Did I? No, I guess I didn’t.

I run my hand over my face. “Things are complicated.”

Do I find her attractive? Hell, yes, I do. Something about her calls to me, but there is so much more to her, to *me*, than anybody knows. So while a part of me would be totally game if Yasmin wanted something, I know it has ‘bad idea’ written all over it.

“They don’t have to be.”

I chuckle, but the sound lacks humor. “But they are.”

Her hand covers mine on the table. I look down at her pale, way smaller hand enveloping mine. To an innocent onlooker, we’d look like a couple, immersed in some kind of private discussion, but it’s never been like that between the two of us. Callie is a friend, an annoying little sister nobody actually wants, but you have to love her regardless. Nothing less is an option.

“What’s going on, Nix? You’ve been acting off. And don’t even start with that evading bullshit. Because we both know there is something going on.”

“There is,” I say, my tone tight.

Callie waits for me to continue, but when she realizes I'm not planning to, she sighs. "Fine. I can respect you not wanting to talk about it, as long as you know you *can* talk to me about it. Whatever *it* might be. Not just me, the guys are there too. Whatever is going on, you're not alone."

"Thanks, Cals. I appreciate it."

And I really do, but there's no way I'm sharing this with anyone. Not even my friends. Especially not my friends.

Needing to lighten the mood, I ask, "So what were you doing at the administrative office?"

A smile spreads over Callie's face. "Since you're asking..."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

YASMIN

“You’re still here?”

My head snaps up, eyes landing on Vanessa standing in the doorway of one of the classrooms. My hands fly to my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart underneath my palm.

“You scared me,” I exhale on a laugh.

“Sorry.” Vanessa smiles kindly. She comes inside, leaving the door open behind her. “I was just doing my rounds before closing.”

“Is it already that late?” I pull out my phone, and sure enough, it’s already past eight in the evening. “Sorry, I’ll be out of here soon. I was just proofing a few essays for kids and forgot about the time. I promised them I’d leave the essays with you so they can pick them up, since I won’t be back here until next week.”

Finishing the last paragraph, I collect my things as Vanessa goes around the room doing her thing. Blairwood’s Bright Haven is smaller than the one I attended in New York, so they don’t keep it open twenty-four seven, but there is an emergency contact, and one of the staff is always on call in case something happens.

“Busy week?” Vanessa asks, putting some books on shelves where they belong.

I sigh, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yeah, this semester is kicking my ass.”

Vanessa’s hand falls on my shoulder, giving me an affectionate squeeze. “If it’s too much, you know you can take a break. The kids will understand.”

Before she even finishes I’m already shaking my head. “It’s not that. I love coming here. Working with these kids is what keeps me sane. They have so much potential.”

Besides, being here brings me peace like no other place can since it’s a reminder of home. I’ve spent countless hours in a community center like this one. Hanging out with kids my age who were in similar situations, asking for help or helping. This place holds so many memories for me, and there is no way I’ll give up on it.

“They certainly do.”

We chat for a little while longer about the center and kids as she finishes. Together we go to the front where her things are already waiting for her.

“I corrected these. Can you make sure the kids grab them when they come?”

Vanessa picks up the papers, giving them a curious once-over. She chuckles.

“What?”

“Post-it notes?”

I can feel my cheeks flush. “I want them to know their work is appreciated or give motivation when it’s necessary.”

I’m not sure what kind of teachers they have—maybe they’re excellent, maybe they suck. Whichever it is, I want them to know that there is at least one person out there who sees them, sees the work they’re putting in, sees how far they’ve come and wants them to do better next time. One person who believes in them and cheers them on.

“You’ll make a great teacher one day, Yasmin.”

I return her kind smile. “I hope so.”

Vanessa puts the papers in her desk drawer, locking it once she’s finished. “Ready?”

I nod my agreement, pulling the zipper on my jacket. Vanessa turns off the light, and together we go outside into the cold night.

“You need a ride?” Vanessa asks, looking through her purse for keys.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks.” I tip my head toward my car. “See you next week!”

“Next week.”

Rubbing my hands to keep them warm, I quickly walk to my car. Sliding the key in, I unlock it and open the door. Since I’ve been here the whole afternoon, the inside of the car is almost as freezing as the outside.

I put the key in the ignition and turn it to start the car.

Nothing.

“What now?” I frown, looking down at the console like it’ll tell me what’s wrong. I try again, but the result is the same. “You have to be shitting me.”

I give it another try—shaking the damned thing for good measure—but there is nothing. No reaction. No sound. Nada. No response whatsoever.

“Dammit!” Pounding my fist against the steering wheel, I lean my head down. “Just what I needed.”

Sighing, I slide the phone out of my pocket and go through my contacts as I weigh my options. I could call Vanessa, she just left a little while ago

which means she can't be that far, but she lives in a different direction from campus, and I don't want to ask her to go out of her way for me. I could always go back to campus on foot, but that will take forever. I seriously don't have time for that nor the desire to freeze to death.

Nibbling at my lip, I stop at the contact, the only logical choice. I don't like doing it, I hate depending on others, but it's not like I have many options. Letting my lip pop out, I press call, and wait. Callie picks up after a few rings, laughing.

"Hey, Cals."

"Hey, stop it!" she yells, followed by more laughter.

Confused, I look around.

"Umm... Okay?" I frown. This is obviously a bad time. I guess walking it is.

"No, not you," she squeals, and I can hear Hayden mutter something in the background. "Hayden!"

I cringe at her high-pitched voice. "Did I catch you in a bad moment? I seriously don't need to hear you having sex. Have mercy on my poor lonesome self."

I don't even want to think about when the last time was that I had sex. When you're trying to graduate college early while at the same time juggling work and volunteering, partying and sex are definitely not on the top of your to-do list.

"We're not having sex. Hayden, will you stop tickling me?" She inhales a deep breath as if collecting herself. "Hey, Yas, what's up?"

"It's seriously okay. You don't have to..."

"Yas." There is a note of warning in her tone that makes me pause.

I close my eyes and murmur into the speaker. "Do you think you could pick me up?"

"What happened?" Callie asks immediately, the worry in her voice clear.

"I'm fine," I rush to reassure her. "Just my stupid car decided to die on me. I was tutoring at Bright Haven. You know I wouldn't..."

"Stop it," she interrupts me mid-sentence. "We'll be there. Wait in the car, you hear me?"

"Thanks, Callie," I say quietly as relief spreads through me.

"Anytime. I'm serious, Yas. Wait in the car. We'll be there in no time," she repeats, before disconnecting the call.

The car's headlights blind me as it pulls to a stop behind me. Grabbing my things from the passenger seat, I open the door and get out, only to stop in my tracks.

"You've gotta be shitting me."

The familiar black BMW is parked behind my piece of shit car. There are a dozen possible scenarios as to why Hayden and Callie would take Nixon's car to come and pick me up—maybe Zane took Hayden's truck, or Nixon's car was the easiest to access—but for some reason, I don't believe any of them are true.

Nope, Nixon is the one sitting inside that car, waiting for me. I just know it.

The driver's door opens, and Nixon gets out, that smirk of his firmly plastered on his lips. He leans against the door and cocks an eyebrow at me. "You coming or what?"

Since I've been freezing while waiting for him for the past twenty minutes I should jump inside and relish the warmth, but my body doesn't move.

"What? You don't even wanna peek underneath the hood to try and pretend like you know what might be wrong with the car? Isn't that a typical guy move in this situation?" The words come out before I can stop them, way snarkier than I intended them to be. I cross my arms over my chest, and tuck my frozen fingers underneath my upper arms in hopes of keeping them warm.

He gives me a knowing look but doesn't bite back. "You wound me, babe. You should know by now that I have better moves than that. Besides, it's cold as fuck and darker than a rat's nest out here." He tilts his head to the side. "C'mon. I'll take you home, and tomorrow we can come and see what's going on under the hood."

Slowly, I move toward his car. "So what you're trying to say is that you know something about cars, but you're too lazy to look now?"

He narrows his eyes at me, but there is a tick in the corner of his mouth, saying he's fighting a laugh. "Do you want to walk back to campus?"

"You wouldn't." I stop in front of the passenger door and look over the hood at him.

He's casually dressed, which should look lazy and take away some of his appeal, but it doesn't. Of course, it doesn't. Jeans and a hoodie fit him

perfectly, and with his hair mussed like he just woke up and a few days of stubble covering his jaw, he looks like sex on a stick.

Seriously, Yas? Get a grip.

As if he can read my mind, Nixon lifts his brows, that smirk of his popping out to play. “You keep that sass up, and you’ll find out for yourself.”

Glaring at him, I take my sweet time opening the door and sliding into the passenger seat. He wouldn’t actually leave me, at least I don’t think he would.

The car is already warm and cozy, and I sigh happily as I snuggle inside. Nixon lowers into the driver’s seat and pulls the car out onto the road.

Now that I’m safely inside and warming up, I turn to him. “You wouldn’t have left me, now would you?”

“Oh, I totally would.” Nixon laughs at my gaping mouth. “Okay, I wouldn’t have *left* you. But I would make you walk all the way to campus while I’d trail after you in the car.”

I punch him in the shoulder. “You, Nixon Cole, are an asshole.”

“That’s not what you said the last time.”

His words should be teasing, but the look he gives me is anything but. Our eyes meet for a moment, the small space sizzling with something. I’m not sure what, or even if I want to name it. He holds my stare for more than is appropriate given the fact that we’re sitting in a moving car and he’s behind the wheel, but I can’t let go.

A soft buzzing sound spreads through the car, startling us. I slide my hand in my pocket but realize my phone is silent.

“I think your phone is vibrating,” I say, looking around for the source of the noise.

Nixon looks at the rearview mirror, and sure enough, the screen of his phone peeking from the pocket of his jacket on the back seat is lit.

He returns his attention to the road. “Can you grab it for me?”

“Um, sure.”

I try to reach for it, but the seatbelt is poking me in the chest. Sighing, I unbuckle my seatbelt and turn around to grab the phone.

“Who is it?”

Sitting back in the passenger seat, I turn the screen face up and look at it. A photo of a gorgeous young girl, probably a few years younger than us, stares back at me. She has the biggest, brightest, most innocent smile I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Smalls.” My voice sounds off even to my own ears as I read the name on the screen. It sounds familiar, but it takes me a moment to connect the dots.

Smalls. The girl Nixon was talking to the night of the championship game. The girl who brings out a side of Nixon I’ve never seen him show to anybody on campus.

I love you too.

I hand him the phone because looking at her is like a punch to my gut. My stomach clenches tightly, bile rising in my throat.

He’s a player, what were you thinking?

I should have known better, but after that night at his house, it seemed like things with Nixon were finally settling down. Yeah, I still gave him a hard time since there were moments when the pull to do it was stronger than me, but he didn’t take it the wrong way. It actually seems like he finds it amusing.

Only there is nothing amusing about this moment right now.

The connection that we shared only seconds ago is completely broken by reality. I’m not sure why I’m affected like I am right now. It shouldn’t matter. Nixon Cole doesn’t belong to me. Hell, I don’t want him to. Yet I can’t help but wonder...

Who is she? What is the connection between them? And more importantly, what is she to him?

It’s none of your business, I try to reason with myself as I turn my head to look out the window. *None of your goddamn business.*

I try not to listen to his side of the conversation, but it’s hard not to since we’re sitting so close together.

“What is it, Smalls?” Tenderness and worry mix in his voice as he answers her call. His emotions are so strong they’re almost palpable.

Whatever she says has him straightening in his seat. “What? Okay, I’m on my way.”

He hangs up, and throws the phone onto the console as he checks the rearview mirror and turns on the blinker.

“Where are you going?” I ask, when I see him switching to the interstate instead of going back to campus, but he doesn’t say anything. His jaw is set tight, eyes glued to the road. “Nixon? Where are you going? You were supposed to take me to campus.”

“I have something to take care of,” he grits. His whole body is still, fingers clenching the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles are drained of all

color.

“Then take me back. Hell, leave me here, and I’ll walk the rest of the way back.”

There is no way I’m going with him wherever he’s going. Not if *she* is there. The girl who seems to have him wrapped around her finger like that. The girl who gets that tender, protective side I haven’t seen him show to anybody but her. No way.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Well, I’m not going.”

He turns to me, giving me a hard look. “Well, you don’t have any other choice.” With that he presses his foot harder on the gas.

“Nixon!” I try to protest, but it’s no use, he’s completely tuned me out.

He’s driving like a maniac, and I can only hope that he doesn’t crash us into something.

Since it’s late on a weeknight, the interstate is blessedly empty as we speed by, our surroundings just a dark blur.

Nixon’s deadly quiet, and I don’t waste my words since I know he won’t listen. I’m not even sure he can hear me at this point. He’s stuck in his own head; whatever has happened, whatever the girl said, it did something to him.

I’m not sure how long it takes before he steers us off the interstate and onto another road. The headlights of his car illuminate the welcome sign.

I swallow hard, my fingers tightening around the door handle. *Is this where she lives?*

Different scenarios go through my head, my heart racing with all the possibilities, but I don’t dare ask.

Nixon turns on the blinker and takes the next right turn. The gravel crackles underneath the tires as he drives up the narrow road. Just when I decide he’s gone mad, I see it.

A huge colonial-style house appears in the darkness. It seems like the lights are on in every room in the house, illuminating the darkness surrounding it.

There is a circle driveway with a fountain in the middle. It’s currently frozen but I can imagine how it looks in the spring.

“What is this?” I ask, my eyes taking it all in. I’ve never seen anything like this. In the city there are only buildings and pavement, and that’s about it.

Nixon turns toward me, finally looking at me. The haunted look is still in

his eyes. I don't know what I expect him to say, but it surely isn't the words that leave his mouth.

“This is my home.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NIXON

Yasmin's mouth falls open at my revelation, but I don't stick around to see what she has to say. Parking the car, I quickly turn it off before I jump outside and run up the stairs. The front door swings open, and my sister's crying face greets me. She runs to my arms, burrowing her head into my neck, and sobs. I wrap my arms around her, holding her tightly.

"S-she j-just f-fell," Jade stutters, her shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs.

My throat clenches at how broken and scared she sounds. I want to hold her close and reassure her everything will be okay, but I can't do that until I convince myself that she's fine first.

"Where is she?" I push her away, just enough so I can see her face. Her blue eyes are red, and her face a mess of tears and snot. Guilt squeezes my heart. God, she looks so young. Too young to be dealing with this all on her own.

Jade might have just turned eighteen, but looking at her like this, with no makeup, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy knot, and in her old pink PJs, she looks younger than that.

I push my feelings away, forcing myself to compartmentalize. There isn't time for me to wallow. Not now. She needs me. *They* need me.

I put my hands on Jade's shoulders and give her a little shake. "Where is she, Jade?" I repeat, trying to keep my panic in check. There is no time for me to freak out, not now.

"B-bed," she snuffles, wiping at her cheeks. "When she regained consciousness I helped her to bed."

"Did you call the ambulance?"

Jade scoffs. "You know she didn't want it."

Of course, she didn't. Rubbing my hand over my face, I let it fall down by my side.

"There wasn't any blood, but she does have a bump on her head."

I nod and lean down to kiss the top of her head. "You did great, Smalls," I rasp. "I'll go in and check on her."

Her fingers clench my shirt like she wants to hold on to me, but eventually, she lets go. Squeezing her shoulder, I walk inside. My footsteps echo against the marble floors as I rush through the foyer and up the stairs,

not stopping once until I get to the double door at the end of the hallway.

I close my eyes and take one deep breath to collect myself before turning the doorknob and entering the room.

The space is dim. The only light turned on is the lamp on the nightstand.

“Nixon.” She shakes her head. “I told your sister not to call you.”

“Is that a way to greet your favorite son?” I ask lightly, plastering a smile on my face.

The door closes behind me as I enter and go toward her. My eyes sting as I see her frail body lying propped against the headboard. She’s lost some weight since the last time I was here. There are bones protruding under her skin, but at the same time she looks chubby. The doctors tell us it’s all the water that’s gathering inside her body since her kidneys don’t work properly to process all the liquids.

“If I remember correctly, you’re my only son,” Mom laughs. It sounds more like a pant like she doesn’t have enough energy to produce the right sound, but the tilt to her lips is unmistakable.

Mom was—*is*, I remind myself, still *is*—one of those people who is always laughing, always capable of finding something good and bright in this world. A person who goes out of her way to cheer somebody up, even when her own world is falling apart.

You won’t break, I chant on repeat in my mind as I come closer to the bed.

“Doesn’t make me any less of your favorite, now does it?”

I lean down, pressing my mouth against her bald head in a soft kiss. My touch lingers only a moment longer than necessary. Stolen seconds that will soon enough be the only thing I have left once the disease takes her away from us.

Not today, though. Not today.

“I guess you’re right.”

Her fingers wrap around my hand that’s cupping her cheek, giving it a soft squeeze. They’re bony and cold against my skin. I pull away and take them between my palms, rubbing them softly to warm them, if only a little bit.

“It’s good that she called,” I chastise gently. “You can’t scare us like that.”

“I’m fine, just a little bump on the head, that’s all.”

I run my hand over her bare scalp, feeling the bump she’s talking about.

I should have been here. If I were, maybe...

Her grip on my fingers tightens, drawing me out of my thoughts.

“Don’t you dare think that, Nixon.” The blue-gray irises that match mine land on my eyes, her expression hard. “You couldn’t have changed anything. It was an accident. I promise to be more careful in the future.”

I nod, accepting her explanation, although I know it’s just empty words. She might want to keep her promise, but the truth is, she won’t be able to, not with this fucking disease slowly sucking the life out of her.

Mom yawns, her eyelids fluttering closed. She’s always tired these days. Always in pain.

“You do that.” I swallow the lump in my throat and get on my feet. “You should rest. I’ll leave the door open, you call if you need anything.”

“You should go back...”

I shake my head no. “I’m staying here tonight. You just sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her eyes are already closed by the time I get to the door. I hold onto the doorframe and look back at the woman who’s my mother, but at the same time as far away from my mother as possible.

My hands clench by my sides, the need to slam my fist into something, anything really, so strong I can barely contain it.

Not here. Not yet.

Gritting my teeth, I force myself to let go and take a step back. Quietly, I leave the room, making sure to leave the door ajar so I can hear her if she needs anything.

“How is she?” Jade asks quietly once I step into the hallway.

I look up and find my sister leaning against the wall. She cleaned her face, but her eyes are still red, with dark circles underneath them, her face pale like a ghost.

“Sleeping.” I rub my hand over my face. “She wasn’t happy I came home.”

“I didn’t...”

“No,” I stop her before she can continue. “You did good, I need to know things like this. I need to know so I can help.”

If you really wanted to help, you’d man up and move back home, the little voice at the back of my head taunts me, but I push it back.

“She’s growing weaker. And I worry th-that...” Jade’s voice breaks, more tears filling her eyes. I cross the hallway and pull her into my arms.

“I know, Smalls. I know,” I whisper in her hair, holding her tightly. At this point I’m not even sure who’s holding who together. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

“You’re staying?” Jade pulls back, wiping her tears to look at me.

I push a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Yes, I’ll stay. Go to bed, I’ll check in on Mom later.”

“I don’t mind...”

This time my tone is firmer. “Get some sleep, Jade.”

Finally she nods, her shoulders relaxing as if me being here has lifted the weight off her shoulders.

So damn selfish.

“Kay. Goodnight, Nix.”

I stand in my spot and watch her go to her room, closing the door behind her. I’m not sure how long I stand there, just staring at the closed door.

Shaking my head to snap myself out of it, I walk down the hallway and back downstairs to check that everything’s closed.

The ground floor is coated in darkness, but I don’t bother turning the lights on. I’ve walked down these hallways so many times I could do it with my eyes closed.

I’m about to go into the kitchen to get something to drink when I hear her voice.

“She’s your sister.”

My head snaps up, and I see Yasmin sitting on the couch in the living room. The only light illuminating the space is a small lamp in the corner. She pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them.

“She is.” I walk inside and sit on the couch next to her. I could have easily sat anywhere else, but I don’t want to look at her while telling her all of this. Hell, I don’t want to tell her anything either, but I can’t leave her hanging after dragging her all the way here like a maniac without offering an explanation.

“Your mom is sick,” she says softly, but there is no mistaking her words. It’s a statement, not a question.

“Breast cancer. Stage four. It has metastasized...” I shake my head, running my fingers through my hair. “Fuck, everywhere. There is nothing they can do about it.”

My words ring in the empty room, condemning and final. It’s like every time somebody says it out loud another nail is stuck in my mother’s coffin.

I hate it.

I hate this disease. I hate how it's ripping my family apart, and there is nothing we can do about it. I hate what it's doing to the best woman I know, how it's stealing parts of her, piece by broken piece, until there won't be anything left of the woman whom I love more than life itself.

"Nixon..." Yasmin gasps. From the corner of my eye I can see her turn to look at me, I can imagine her big doe-like eyes observing me, but I don't turn to face her. "I'm so sorry."

Because I hate this too. Hate how when people find out the truth they look at you differently. I don't need their pity. I don't want *her* pity.

My head falls back against the couch, eyes closing. "Yeah, me too."

We sit in silence, neither of us saying anything. The couch is small, so we're sitting close. So close that when Yasmin shifts in her seat, I can feel her body brushing against mine. My body reacts to her nearness, but I ignore it.

"What about your dad?" she finally asks, breaking the silence.

My whole body stiffens, like it does every time somebody has mentioned him, but somehow I manage to get the words out. "He's gone."

"Like at work?"

"No, Yasmin. As in *gone*." My eyes snap open, and I turn my head to the side to look at her. A small frown is between her brows. "I told you, you're not the only one who has a deadbeat for a father."

I watch the puzzle pieces fall into place as the realization dawns on her. That plump mouth of hers forms a little O, but she snaps it shut.

"He just packed his shit and left." I shake my head as a bitter chuckle finds a way out of my lungs. "He didn't even have the guts to say it to our faces. He left before I returned home, leaving a fucking note."

"Nixon."

She doesn't say anything else. Doesn't try to offer excuses or say how sorry she is or any other mindless bullshit like that. Instead, she places her hand over mine, giving it a firm squeeze.

A zap of electricity passes between us, a soft burn just underneath the skin. She must feel it too because she inhales sharply and tries to pull her hand out of mine, but I stop her before she can do it.

Turning my palm face-up, I grab her hand, intertwining our fingers. Her hand is smaller than mine, fingers slender, skin a few shades darker and so damn soft it should be illegal.

Lifting my eyes from our clasped hands, I find her watching me. Waiting. For what I'm not sure, but whatever it is, I don't have it in me to give it to her. Everything that has happened in the past couple of hours has wiped me out completely, leaving me empty.

I hold her stare, and we stay like that. Sitting quietly in the darkness, the only connection our locked hands and unswerving gazes.

I'm not sure for how long, but it doesn't matter. Because in the middle of the storm that's raging around me, she's my anchor, holding me together and offering silent understanding I'm not sure I deserve but will take nonetheless.

I don't want to let go, but when I see her yawn for the second time, I give her hand a gentle squeeze.

"Let's get you to bed."

"You don't have to..." she starts to protest but I hoist her up to her feet.

"You're tired, you should get some rest." I look at the darkness over her shoulder. "I can't take you back. Not tonight, but if you want to..."

"We can stay here. I don't mind."

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod my head. "Thank you, Yasmin."

"No thanks needed."

Still holding onto her hand, I lead her upstairs and down the hallway. I creak open the first door on the left and enter, flicking the switch on.

The room is almost exactly the same as I left it, not a thing moved from its place or replaced. The same blue walls with posters of my favorite players plastered all over them. Some have been up so long that the paper has turned yellow and one corner isn't holding onto the walls anymore. A bookcase that holds more football trophies than books. An empty desk in the corner with a closet just beside it. A king-sized bed that takes up most of the room, with clean, plain white bedsheets already covering the mattress. A dresser opposite the bed with a big TV just above it.

"This is your room," Yasmin points out, her eyes taking in the space. I wonder what she sees when she looks at it.

"I'll take the couch," I say, shrugging.

"I'm not taking..."

"You'll sleep here." My sharp words piss her off, I can see it clearly in the stubborn tilt of her chin, so I offer more gently, "I'll probably go to my mom's room to keep an eye on her. She's trying to pretend it's all okay, but I know it's not. She's getting worse every day."

Yasmin exhales, her face softening. "Who's staying with her?"

“Jade mostly. We hired a nurse to come and help around the house when she’s in school. I wanted to stay home when Mom was first diagnosed in summer, take a year off, but she didn’t want to hear it.” I can still remember how pissed off she was at me, demanding I pack my shit and go back to campus. I still think if I hadn’t listened to her, she’d have thrown my stuff and me out of the window and locked the door so I couldn’t come back inside. I shake my head, pushing the memory away. “Anyway, we probably won’t be able to leave straight away. I’ll have to make some calls, talk to the hospice to hire help around the clock. I don’t want Jade scared like this in the future.”

I don’t want to be scared like that, but I don’t say it out loud. I feel that if I do, it’ll make it all that more real.

“That’s okay, no rush.”

I lift my brows. “Busy bee Yasmin Hernandez doesn’t have any plans for tomorrow?”

She elbows me in the ribs. “I have plans, thank you very much. But it’s nothing that can’t wait a few hours. Besides, you promised to check out my car. Don’t think I forgot about that.”

Reluctantly, one side of my lips tips up. “Duly noted.” Another yawn breaks out, and she covers her mouth with her free hand to stifle it. “C’mon. Off to bed.”

Letting go of her hand, I walk to the dresser and pull open a drawer. Grabbing the first shirt on the stack, I close the drawer and turn back toward Yasmin, offering it to her. “If you want to change. And if you leave your clothes by the door once you’re done I can get them washed so they’re fresh in the morning.”

Her brows rise. “Now all you have to say is that you’ll wake me up with a cup of coffee, and I might actually start to like you, Cole.”

“I thought you already did,” I say, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. My thumb brushes over her cheekbone, and I can feel her skin pebble under my touch. My words unnerve her. No matter how hard she tries to cover it, it’s written all over her face. A grin spreads over my lips at the thought. Not wanting to give her a chance for a comeback, I take a step back. “Goodnight, Yasmin.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YASMIN

Slowly, I come to my senses. It's as if I'm waking up from a long dream. Only I don't sleep long enough to actually dream. Or maybe I do, but I just never remember them.

Extending my hands above my head, I stretch my body. My muscles resist the pull, the ache in my back growing to the point of pain, until I force myself to relax once again.

At the back of my mind something feels off, but I push the thought back, wanting to enjoy this moment for as long as possible. One moment of nothingness before all the worries that have been pushed to the back of my mind come rushing back.

It feels so good not to be awoken by the irritating chime of my alarm clock. I don't remember the last time...

Then it all comes back to me.

My car dying. Nixon picking me up. The phone call. Photo of a girl. Drive all the way to the middle of nowhere. Which actually turned out to be Nixon's house. His sister. Mother. Cancer.

I snap upright, the covers falling in my lap as I take in the room.

Nixon's room.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I look around the dim space. The early morning light is peeking behind the shutters, and when my eyes fall on one of those old-school alarm clocks that's sitting on the night table, I see that it's six-thirty in the morning.

Scooting to the edge of the bed, I get up. It's not even surprising that I've slept well. Nixon's bed is huge and so comfy it was like I was sleeping on a cloud. But then again, compared to the beds in the dorm, everything is better.

A shiver runs through me as my bare feet touch the floor. Nibbling at my lips, I look at the drawer on the other side of the room. The same one Nixon pulled the shirt I'm currently wearing from last night.

It isn't snooping if I'm trying to preserve my toes from freezing and falling off, right?

Screw it.

Crossing the room, I open the first drawer and find stacks of t-shirts neatly put away. Closing it, I open the second one and score. Socks and underwear each take half of the space. I grab a pair of socks and close the

drawer. Going back to bed, I sit down and pull them onto my cold feet. Once I'm set, I look at the door. The house seems quiet on the other side. I should probably stay here until Nixon comes to find me, but now that I'm awake there is no going back to sleep even if I try, and I can't just sit here and do nothing. Besides, my body craves caffeine.

Do I seriously want to go around a stranger's house—no, not a stranger's, *Nixon's* house—all on my own?

My stomach grumbles in protest, reminding me that with all that happened I didn't have dinner.

Guess I do.

As quietly as possible, I get to the door and pull it open. Just as I suspected, the hallway is dark and empty. On the tips of my toes, I go outside, slowly closing the door behind me.

I walk down the hallway, all the time expecting somebody to jump from one of the rooms and demand some kind of explanation, but nothing happens.

I finally get to breathe in relief once I'm on the ground floor, which is equally quiet and empty.

Yesterday was a blur, and I didn't get a chance to properly look around, so I do it now as I'm looking for the kitchen.

The foyer is big, an open space with a grand staircase leading to the second floor. The marble floors are cool underneath my feet even though I'm wearing socks. Different art pieces hang on the walls. All look big and freaking real, not some lame copy you can buy pre-framed at Walmart. Nope.

Nixon's home looks like something out of a magazine. It should seem cold and untouchable, but the small details make it more homey. Potted plants in corners. Shoes scattered next to the shoe closet. A family portrait hanging between the art pieces. I stop in front of it and look at Nixon's family. It must be a recent photo, maybe a couple of years old. Nixon looks younger; there is no scruff on his jaw, but I would recognize that grin anywhere. He favors his father; same strong build, same golden-streaked hair, same smile. His hand is placed on Nixon's shoulder.

Then there are his mother and sister. Jade is scrawny, with thin, long limbs and masses of dark hair, braces shining on her teeth. She has the same dark brown hair as their mother, and both brother and sister have their mother's eyes.

"I should take it down, but my mom loves that damn picture so much." The soft voice makes me jump.

I turn around, my hand clenched over my chest, right over my racing heart, and find Jade standing on the last step, her hand gripping the railing. She's still in her pajamas, her hair pulled into a messy bun. She looks like crap. Her skin is pale, making the dark circles underneath her eyes stand out. Her cheeks are hollow and from the way her shirt is hanging on her shoulders I know she recently lost weight.

Her mother is dying and she's the one that has to watch it twenty-four seven, of course she lost weight.

"I didn't hear you coming," I say, trying to calm down my racing heartbeat.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Jade takes the final step and comes closer. "I didn't think anybody would be up." She rubs at her tired face. One lone chuckle escapes her. "I actually didn't think yesterday happened at all."

My heart squeezes painfully at her words because I recognize the girl trying to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. I know her pain, understand it better than she'd ever know because I've lived through it. Sometimes I still do.

"I should be the one apologizing. I didn't mean to snoop, but I'm an early riser, and I needed some coffee."

Jade slowly takes me in as if assessing me.

We didn't talk much yesterday. After Nixon ran out of the car like it was about to explode, I waited a little, not knowing what to think. Then I saw Jade coming out and them embracing. I watched them exchange some words, and then Nixon was rushing inside, while Jade stayed outside, her arms wrapped around herself.

Until she saw me.

I'm not sure which one was more surprised to find the other, her or me.

I knew there was no sense in trying to hide, so I put on my big girl panties and got out. It wasn't like I was going anywhere anytime soon.

Reluctantly I walked up the steps. Only when I came closer could I see the resemblance.

"I didn't know Nixon was with a friend," she said as she took me in.

This was the girl who had Nixon dropping everything just to come to her as soon as possible. Smalls. She was the girl from the photo, but at the same time she wasn't anything like her at all.

She looked both younger and older at the same time. The happiness that was radiating from the photo was nowhere to be found in real life. She was

still pretty, but it was obvious she'd been crying. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her whole face blotchy from tears. The lines of her face were hard, but overall she looked tired.

So damn tired.

It was a feeling I could relate to all too well.

"I had some car issues, and Nixon picked me up," I offered as an explanation. "I'm Yasmin."

I could see the wheels turning in her mind, trying to place me somewhere, figure out what I am to Nixon, but I gave nothing away. With those blue-gray eyes fixed on mine and looking at her now, up close like this, I knew what she'd say even before the words left her mouth. "Jade, Nixon's sister."

"I suck at cooking, but I make a mean coffee," Jade says, breaking me out of my thoughts. I blink away the memory and offer her a small smile.

"I'd love some coffee."

She tips her head, silently asking me to follow her, so I do. I don't mind the quiet since I'm the same. Just give me coffee, and let me wake up before you bombard me with questions and the need to chatter.

When we get to the kitchen I sit at the chair at the bar dividing the dining from the kitchen area, not wanting to get in the way.

Jade works quickly, opening the cabinets to grab two cups. She puts them under the machine and checks that everything is ready before pressing the button to start the coffee maker.

As she waits for the coffee to brew, she opens another cabinet and starts going through the bottles piled in there. Medicine. She's going through different medicines, I realize, doing it like she's done it a thousand times before. It's probably because she has. Then she grabs a kettle, fills it with water and puts it on the stove to heat. When she turns around she finds me observing her.

"These are Mom's," she explains, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "She used to love coffee, but it falls hard on her stomach so I make her tea instead." She chuckles sadly. "She hates it, but I read somewhere it could help so she drinks it all the same."

"Well she must love you a lot to take that torture," I try to joke to lighten the mood.

A smile flashes across her face, but it's gone almost as soon as it appears. "She does, especially considering we both know it's pretty useless."

I open my mouth to say something, although I'm not sure what exactly,

but the coffee machine beeps, signaling the coffee is done. Jade turns her back on me, effectively shutting down the conversation.

“Creamer?”

“If you have it.”

She opens the fridge and pours a little in both cups before handing one to me. Jade leans against the counter and takes one long sip.

I do the same, enjoying the first caffeine jolt to my system. My eyes fall shut as the taste of coffee spreads over my tongue. It’s addicting. I don’t even remember the first time I tried it, because it’s been so long. Hell, maybe my mom gave me coffee when I was a baby.

“So, you and Nixon,” Jade comments after a while.

I open my eyes to look at her, but keep my face neutral. It’s not like there is anything for me to hide. “What about us?”

“Are you like, dating?”

“What?” I almost spit the coffee. “No. Where did you get that idea?”

The idea of Nixon and I dating is so absurd I’m not sure if I want to laugh or cry. Probably a little bit of both.

Jade shrugs, completely unfazed by my reaction. “He never brings girls around here.”

“Trust me, me being here has nothing to do with Nixon actually wanting me here. As I told you, I had car trouble, he picked me up, and just as he was taking me home, you called and here we are.”

“And here you are,” she hums. I’m not sure what she means by it, but I don’t ask. “So how do you know him?”

Taking another sip of coffee, I put the cup down on the counter. “We have a class together. Plus his teammate is dating my roommate.”

“So you hang out a lot?”

The conversation seems to perk her up a little, and it pains me not to be able to give her what she wants. I’m not sure how close the two of them are, but I can’t really imagine Nixon telling his little sister all the gory details of his college life.

“Not really.” I’m not sure what we are exactly. Acquaintances? I don’t think so. He knows my secrets, and now I know his too. Secrets, by the looks of it, that neither of us has shared with anybody else. Not even our closest friends. But if we aren’t acquaintances and we aren’t friends, where does that put us? The hell if I know. “Why do you ask?”

Jade looks away, as if embarrassed, and gives me another shrug. “I’m just

trying to see how his life is when he's at college, that's all."

So I was right. Although can I really blame Nixon for not opening up completely to her? He seems pretty protective of his little sister, it's normal he doesn't want to talk about wild parties in his house and hooking up with girls.

"Don't you guys talk?"

"We do, but it's not the same."

"What's not the same?"

In unison we both turn around to the woman standing in the doorway.

"Mom! You shouldn't be up on your own," Jade chastises her, going straight to her mother. Her arms wrap around the woman's slender shoulders, helping her toward the chair.

"I can still walk on my own, young lady," she admonishes, but doesn't refuse her help getting to the table. I'm not entirely sure if it's because she wants to make Jade feel useful, or if she actually needs the help, but doesn't want to ask for it.

If I thought Jade is skinny, she has nothing on her mother. She's practically all skin and bones. Her complexion is pale, making the circles around her eyes stand out.

Once she's seated, her eyes, those familiar, sharp blue-gray irises that match the woman in the portrait, find me. "I didn't know we had company."

She slides her hand over the beanie covering her head self-consciously. It's instinctive, although there's nothing she has to be self-conscious about. This is her home, after all.

"I'm so sorry to intrude," I say softly, trying to keep my voice steady.

Jade shoots a grateful smile my way.

"Mom, this is Yasmin. She's Nixon's friend." Jade makes the introductions and goes to the stove where the kettle whistles.

Her words snap me out of it and I jump to my feet. Crossing the room, I offer her my hand, which she accepts. "I'm Yasmin, it's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Cole."

"Helen," she corrects. "And it's always nice to have company. We have it so rarely these days."

"What are you saying? Anna comes here every day." Jade puts a mug with tea in front of her mom and next to it a little plate containing dozens of different-colored pills she prepared earlier.

Helen looks at me and rolls her eyes. "Anna is my *nurse*." The way she

says it, you'd think she's the devil himself, but something about her expression makes me chuckle, which brings a smile to her lips. "At this point somebody will think she's a part of our family."

Jade pokes her mom in the shoulder softly. "Don't be mean. Anna is nice."

"So you say, she's not poking and probing at you."

I watch as Helen blows over the cup to cool off the tea before taking a little sip. She makes a grimace that I can wholeheartedly relate to. I can smell it all the way here. It's grassy. Chamomile? Or something else? I'm not sure, but it's far from pleasant.

"Do you see what I have to deal with every day?" Helen shakes her head. "You're so lucky I love you."

The smile is still playing on her lips, but so is the darkness creeping behind Jade's eyes. The knowledge that her mother's moments are limited and growing fewer by the day.

My eyes burn, but I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep my emotions at bay.

I look around, needing to focus on something else. Anything other than all the dark feelings swirling around the room.

My eyes land on the stove, and just then, my stomach rumbles loudly, reminding me to feed it.

I jump to my feet. "I know you said you suck at cooking, so how about I make something to eat?"

Both women turn to look at me.

"Oh, you don't have to..." Helen starts to protest, but I stop her before she can finish.

"Nonsense, I'm crashing your family time. Besides, since I'm in the dorm, I don't get a chance to cook as much as I'd like."

"If you really want."

"You'd be doing me a favor, really." I turn to Jade. "Mind helping me find what I need?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NIXON

Gasping, I sit upright. I'm panting, my heart beating rapidly as I look at my surroundings. Light yellow walls, big king-sized bed, the mismatched quilt. I'm at home.

Home.

Running my hand over my face, I try to work the stiffness from my muscles, but it's no use. Every bone in my body hurts from spending the night in the armchair next to my mother's bed.

I let my hand fall back in my lap as I look at the empty bed. The covers are rumped, but my mother is nowhere in sight.

That fear that's become second nature in the last few months returns in full force, intensified by the dream I just had.

The dream in which my mother was no longer here, and when I tried to look for her the only thing I found was darkness.

Darkness that ended up swallowing me whole.

It's a dream I've been having often lately, or some variation of it, and every time it's left me more unnerved than the last.

It's just a dream. Don't be a pussy, Cole.

Then where the hell is she?

Getting to my feet, I check the bathroom, but when I don't find her there either, I go downstairs. As I'm descending the stairs I hear excited chatter followed by a laugh coming from the kitchen.

Mom's laugh.

Jade's laugh.

The sound feels so foreign to my ears. It didn't used to be. Once upon a time we were a noisy family. We'd talk loudly, laugh until tears came to our eyes, and run down the hallways like crazy playing games. Yet somehow over the last few months—ever since Mom's cancer came back once again, followed by Dad leaving—we've tried our best to be quiet, as if not to upset her.

The smell of eggs, bacon and coffee fills the space, and I follow it until I get to the kitchen, where Mom, Jade and Yasmin are sitting around the table, which is full of food. I stop at the threshold and watch. They're talking and laughing like they've been best friends forever.

I'm not sure if I should be relieved or upset.

Mom notices me first. Wiping her mouth with a napkin, she says, “Look who finally decided to show up.”

Now all three heads have turned around toward me, but my eyes are set on one person.

Yasmin.

With all that has happened, I completely forgot she was here. Maybe I didn’t forget, maybe I just want to believe it’s some weird dream instead of reality, but seeing her sitting at the kitchen table between my mother and sister seems too fucking real.

She’s still wearing the shirt I gave her last night, which turns out to be one of the shirts from my high school football team. It looks to be big in the shoulders, the short sleeves falling all the way to her elbows, but I bet if she were to stand right now it would show off a decent part of her legs.

Don’t think about her legs, asshole.

Propping my hip against the doorway, I quirk a brow at them. “If I knew there was a party, I’d have been here even sooner.” Pushing away from the door, I enter the room and go for the coffee maker first. I need coffee—stat, otherwise I’ll fall asleep on my feet.

I’m not sure at what point I fell asleep last night, but for the better part of the evening I just sat by Mom’s bed and watched her sleep. She’d mumble something every now and then, shift from side to side occasionally, but not once did she wake up.

“I told Jade to let you sleep,” Mom says, giving me a hard look. I don’t have to read minds to read her expression.

You didn’t have to sleep by my bedside.

So I shoot her an equally stubborn look of my own. *I wanted to. Deal with it.*

Breaking our staring contest, I get a mug and pour myself coffee.

Even if I don’t sleep in her bedroom, every time I come home, I always wake up a few times during the night and just go in to check on her. It’s unreasonable, because seriously, what could I do? My knowledge of first aid is minimal at best. Still, I can’t let go of the fear that one day I’ll come, and she won’t open her eyes. Because the reality is, that day is coming whether we want it or not.

“If she waited for me to come and help her downstairs, like she should have, you wouldn’t be as lucky,” Jade huffs.

“No matter how you treat me, I’m not an invalid,” Mom protests.

Yet.

The word hangs ominously over our heads, a reminder of what's to come. Before the silence can stretch for too long, she continues, "Besides, we have a guest." Her eyes, clearer than they were last night, focus on me. "You forgot to mention that."

"There were other things that were more... pressing," I finally finish, taking a chair at the table. I grab a piece of bacon and pop it into my mouth, enjoying the crispiness of it. I look at my sister across from me. "Did I enter an alternative universe or did you suddenly learn how to cook?"

Jade kicks me underneath the table with her leg. "Asshole," she mutters, giving me a dirty look. "No, I didn't learn how to cook. Yasmin made it."

I turn my attention to Yasmin, my brows raised in surprise. She's nibbling at her lip, her cheeks rosy. "You cook?"

"You don't?" she shoots right back, her head tilted to the side in a mocking gesture.

"Ha!" Mom shakes her head. "I love to cook, but neither of my two kids seem to have gotten the gene. What they do love is to eat."

Leaning back in my chair, I pat my stomach. "Well, I need all the energy I can get. After all, I'm a growing boy."

Yasmin rolls her eyes, but the playfulness in them is gone when they narrow down at the naked patch of my abs that was revealed when my shirt was pulled to the side. She blinks and looks away, but I swear the rosiness in her cheeks has grown into a full-on blush.

Fuck me.

Mom swats me on the leg. "Behave, you're not in kindergarten."

For all her stern words there is a lightness in her I haven't seen in so long I almost forgot about it.

"Yes, ma'am." I sit straight. My stomach finally catches up with all the smells coming from the table, so I fill my plate to the brim. "O gwod," I mutter as soon as I take the first bite of eggs. I'm not sure what she put in them, but she did something different, and it tastes amazing.

Mom gives Yasmin a look, but I'm too immersed in the food to try and decipher the meaning of it. Instead, I eat quietly, listening to the three of them talk. Both Mom and Jade grill Yasmin about college and her extracurriculars, but she takes it in stride, answering all their questions.

"What about you? Have you decided where you want to go?" Yasmin asks Jade.

I watch as the smile falls off my sister's face. Jade opens her mouth, then closes it.

"She applied to a few schools, but she's hoping to get into Blairwood. Jade's amazing with the camera and wants to study photography," Mom supplies, wiping her mouth with a napkin. She's been nibbling at small bites, and although there is still food on her plate, she ate more than she did the last time I was home.

"Really? That's amazing. I always admire people with the artistic eye. I have none whatsoever. I can't even sing in the shower, that's how bad I am."

Yasmin's laughter eases a bit of the tension that her question caused. Talking about college is a sore subject for Jade.

Ever since we visited Blairwood's campus, even before I officially enrolled, it's been the only thing she talked about. Then cancer happened, and everything changed.

Placing my fork on the plate once I'm done, I look at my family. "We should talk."

Yasmin gets to her feet almost instantly. "I'll go upstairs and change."

"You don't have to..." Mom starts to protest, but Yasmin shakes her head. "It's fine. I have to change and make a phone call anyway."

She offers me a small smile, but I don't have it in me to return it. "I'll take you back to campus in a bit."

"No hurry. I'll be upstairs, come and get me when you're ready."

We watch her leave in silence, and only when I can't hear her footsteps any longer do I face my mother.

"Was this really necessary?" she asks, clearly unhappy with where things are going.

"We have to talk, Mom."

Jade gets up from her seat and starts getting dirty dishes. But it's not her I have to convince so I let her be.

"I know you're going to hate this, but..."

"Then don't say it."

"You need more help. We need more help."

"Anna is already spending most days with me."

"*Most* being the key word here. You scared Jade last night, Mom. You scared me." I put my hand over hers, feeling the frail bones under the cool skin. "When I said I'd take a year off, you asked me to go back to college. When I suggested I could commute from home, you got so pissed you almost

threw me out of the house.”

Mom presses her lips in a tight line and shakes her head. Seeing her like this reminds me of the no-nonsense mom she used to be. “That’s because you need to focus on football and school.”

“The season is over.”

“And you won the national championship! Do you really think you could have done it if you didn’t give it your all? If you were struggling to juggle being home and going to college?”

I know she’s right, but her words hurt all the same. Yes, she asked me to go back to campus, but I could have said no. I *should* have said no. Instead, I took the easy way out. Choosing my career, my future, over my family.

The Ravens might have won the championship, but the win was bitter because I knew what I sacrificed in order to get there.

“You can’t put your life on hold for me.” She gives me a hard stare and then turns to Jade to do the same. “Neither of you can do that. I won’t let you.”

Tears pool in my sister’s eyes, but there is also fury. The plates rattle as she puts them down on the counter with more force than necessary. “You can’t ask me to leave you.”

Mom gets up and goes to her, wrapping her arm around her. “I’m not asking you to leave, I’m asking you to *live*.”

Jade closes her eyes, her throat bobbing as she swallows, trying to keep her emotions in check. One lone tear slips down her cheek regardless.

“I can come back home,” I offer, but before I can finish the sentence, Mom’s stern gaze turns to me. “No.”

Her tone is non-negotiable as she says it. Like just the idea of it is unimaginable. Not that I expected anything different.

“Then you have to let me hire a nurse.”

“I already have a nurse.”

“Around the clock care,” I correct, looking her straight in the eyes. I need her to understand this. How important it is. She can’t ask me to go away and expect me not to worry. “I don’t want to hear anything more about accidental falls.”

Mom sighs, the sound more tired than irritated. “I don’t want anybody hovering over me all the time, Nixon. Not...” She swallows. “Not yet, not when I can do it myself. I want you to live, but I also need to do the same.”

While she still can.

She doesn't say it, but I can hear it.

Mom's been declining rapidly since Christmas. She lost her appetite and with it a significant amount of weight. There are days when she's in so much pain she stays in bed all day, but there are still some days when she feels better, like today, and it's almost like she's coming back to us. But those days are further and further apart.

"No hovering," I promise.

She looks at me for a long while, but then finally nods her agreement. I exhale slowly. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Jumping to my feet, I go to Mom and Jade and wrap my arms around them, pressing my lips against Mom's forehead. "You know I worry, right? I just want to keep you safe."

Mom throws her arm around my shoulder and with the other pulls Jade in tighter for a group hug. "I know. And I love you for it."

"I love you too, Mom."

We hold each other for a while longer. Mom's the first to let go. She wipes at her cheeks, and puts a smile on her face. "Go on, you have to get that girl of yours back to campus."

Giving her one final kiss on the head, I pull back. "I'll be calling the nurses once I get back to campus."

She rolls her eyes. "As if you'd forget."

"You're damn right." Rubbing my hands on the sides of my legs I look toward the doorway. "I guess I'll go and get Yasmin."

"You do that." She pats me on the cheek with a smile. Neither of us misses the fact that I didn't correct her.

"I guess that's it," Yasmin says as soon as I pull in and park in front of her dorm an hour later.

The drive back to school passed in silence. My mind was everywhere at once, thinking about all the things that I need to take care of to ensure Mom, and Jade by extension, are taken care of.

Yasmin could either sense that I needed time or she has her own things to worry about, because she let me be.

"Thanks for bringing me here," she says, offering me a small smile.

“No thanks needed, I was the one after all who... *Shit!* The car. Why didn't you say anything?”

“You seemed like you had a lot on your mind.” She shrugs. “It's no big deal, really.”

“That's no excuse. You should have reminded me. First I basically kidnap you, and now I left you stranded.”

“It's fine. It's not like I need the car anyway.”

I give her a skeptical look.

“Much,” she corrects. “It's not like I need the car much anyway.”

“Give me your keys.” I extend my hand.

She looks at it, then at me before her eyes make the same path once again.

“What? No, you don't need...”

“Give me the keys, Yasmin,” I say, this time firmer.

“But, you don't...” She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “I'll have somebody go and take a look at it. It's not a problem.”

She starts to reach for the door handle, but I put my hand on hers, stopping her. A zap of electricity goes from her hand straight into mine, making me inhale sharply. Her eyes grow wide. Can she feel it too? This connection, this bond, between us?

“You'd be doing me a favor, really. I need...” I clear my throat. “I need to do something. Get lost in something, if only for a little while.”

“Nixon...”

My grip around her wrist tightens. “Give me this. Please. Give me this chance to forget, if only for a little while.”

Yasmin looks at me for what seems like forever. My heart is beating hard in my chest, until she finally gives in and nods once.

“Okay.” With her free hand, she pulls the key out of her pocket and hands it to me. Just when I'm about to grab it, she pulls it back. “But you have to tell me if and how much anything costs. I won't have you paying for my shit.”

“Fine,” I agree quickly. Maybe a little too quickly, because she gives me a warning glare. But this time when I try to reach for the keys, she lets go.

“I mean it, Cole. No funny business.”

“How bad is it?” I ask, leaning down to look at the engine before turning my gaze on Zane. He’s been helping Hayden’s uncle at the garage and out of all of us, he knows the most about cars.

“Except that it’s falling apart, you mean?” Zane grumbles, his hand digging around... something.

Okay, I might have overexaggerated the part when I said I know my shit around cars. I know some basic stuff. Changing a flat tire or the oil? No problem. But this seemed like a task for a pro.

“Her starter is dead.”

“That’s why it didn’t turn on yesterday,” I state the obvious.

“Right. She could also change her filters and oil while she’s at it. I doubt it’s been changed in the last decade.”

“Anything else?” Zane mutters a few more things that need changing. “Will it make this piece of shit more reliable?”

He turns to me, his face flat. “Well, it’ll push it for a little bit longer. Reliable? I wouldn’t go that far.”

Sighing, I run my hand through my hair. I didn’t think so. Where did she get that thing, anyway? Junkyard, most likely.

“Okay. Can you patch it up, or should I take it to the shop?”

His brows shoot up. “All of this?”

“All of this.”

“Does Yasmin know you’re doing it?”

“Of course.” He gives me a look. “Okay, not really, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, right?”

She can’t drive around in something that will most likely get her stranded again soon, or maybe even something worse.

Zane holds my gaze for a while longer before shrugging. “It’s your deathbed, dude.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

YASMIN

The bell above the front door rings just as I push the kitchen door with my hip, carrying a tray of goodies in each of my hands. The late afternoon rush has just ended so I decided to stock the front window with what we have left before I head out for the day and leave Monica alone to close the shop.

“What can I—” The words die on my lips as I catch sight of the person standing on the other side of the counter. “Nixon, what are you doing here?”

A smile flashes on his lips, making my heart flutter.

What the hell is with that?

My heart does *not* flutter. Especially not for obnoxious, arrogant, thinks-he’s-God’s-gift-to-women football players.

We haven’t talked at all since the day he took me to his house, and I found out about his family. He came to get me once his conversation with his mom and sister ended, and soon after we were on our way back to campus. Helen asked me to come back soon, but I avoided making any promises since the chances of me *ever* going back are nonexistent. Nixon and I aren’t friends, we’re barely acquaintances. There isn’t any reason for me to go back.

The ride back to campus was quiet. Nixon was stuck in his own mind, and I decided to let him be. I haven’t asked what they talked about, and he hasn’t offered. Not that I expected anything else. I’m sure he has a lot to deal with without me asking questions and putting my nose where it doesn’t belong.

Nixon lifts his hand, keys dangling from his fingers. “Forget about something?”

Car, right. Of course he’s here about the car. Not like I expected him to be here for something else.

“Did you manage to get it fixed?”

When he missed the turn to the community center where the previous night—a night that at that point seemed like it had been ages ago—we’d left my car, I didn’t say anything. Nixon only realized it when he left me at my dorm. He tried to apologize but I wouldn’t let him, and when he demanded my keys so he could go and check it out by himself, I protested. There was no way I’d depend on a man, I never have before, and I wasn’t about to start now. Well, until those big blue eyes full of torment turned to me pleadingly.

Give me this. Please. Give me this chance to forget, if only for a little

while.

Even thinking about it has me shuddering. I've never seen Nixon seem so... lost. So, defeated. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't say no, even I'm not that ruthless. I gave him the keys and left.

I haven't seen him since.

It's been five days, not that I was counting or anything.

Liar.

Five days of me wondering how he's been.

Has he heard from his sister? How is his mom doing?

The questions rolled in my mind over and over, and I couldn't seem to let them go. I reasoned with myself that it's none of my business, but it's like my brain doesn't care.

"It needed a new starter. Plus, I came to get some coffee. This is still a coffee shop, right?" He gives me that grin of his, and I almost trip over a floorboard.

What the hell's wrong with you? Geez, Yasmin.

Great, and now I'm talking to myself in second person. What's next? I knew one day he'd drive me to insanity, but I didn't picture it like this.

Putting the trays on the counter so they don't fall down on the floor, I wipe my hands on the apron. "Black, right?"

"You can finish that, you know? And yes, black."

I lift my brow at him, but do as he said, carefully placing a batch of chocolate muffins into the window with a pair of tongs.

Nixon takes a stool at the counter, carefully placing my keys down, and watches me work.

"Starter, huh? I should have guessed. How bad was it?"

Soft music is playing in the background, and the shop is relatively silent. Just a few customers are scattered around, most of them students with big cups of coffee at hand, books filling the small tables, and headphones on so they can work in peace.

I never understood how people can do that. How do you concentrate with so many distractions at hand? Nope, no way. I need my peace and quiet. The more secluded the place, the better.

"Not too bad."

Once all the goodies are set and ready, I give Nixon my full attention. "Not too bad?"

"Seventy bucks."

I narrow my eyes at him. “That seems awfully low.”

I don’t know much about cars, but it can’t be easy or cheap finding parts for an old car like mine, can it?

Nixon shrugs. “Zane helped me. He knows people, and those people might owe him a favor or two.”

Great, now I wasn’t just in debt to Nixon, but also Zane.

I place the cup of coffee in front of him. “You shouldn’t have. I could have taken it to the shop.”

“It’s already taken care of, so deal with it.” His hand covers mine. “Is it so hard to accept people’s help?”

“You tell me.”

Our gazes clash and hold. The familiar burn when his skin touches mine has me inhaling sharply. I want to pull my hand out of his, but he isn’t letting go.

“Touché. That’s actually part of the reason why I came.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. I have a feeling I know what this is about. “What’s up?”

“Can you...” With his free hand he rubs the nape of his neck. If I didn’t know better I’d think he’s nervous, but Nixon Cole doesn’t get nervous. And surely not in front of me.

“Is something wrong?” My heart skips a beat as all the possibilities come rushing to my mind. Maybe his mom is getting worse. Or something happened to his sister. Or maybe...

“No,” he says quickly. “No, nothing’s wrong. I actually wanted to ask you if you could keep what happened last week between the two of us?”

“Oh.” I pull back. This time Nixon lets my hand slip away. I shouldn’t feel the loss of his touch, but I do. Not knowing what to do with my hand, I push a strand of hair that slipped my ponytail behind my ear. “Yeah, sure.”

It’s not like I’d go around talking about his private business with anybody anyway. I didn’t even say anything to Callie when she stopped by on Sunday evening and asked about it. I didn’t lie, but I didn’t tell the whole truth either. Thankfully she didn’t stay long, just exchanged some things and was off on her way back to Hayden’s house. At this point, I’m not sure why they even bother pretending, since they’re practically living together.

“Thanks,” he sighs in relief. “The guys don’t know, and I don’t...”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Nixon. I won’t say anything to anybody.”

There is that haunted look in his eyes again. His voice drops low, and he looks away as if trying to hide from me, ashamed. “People look at you differently when they know the truth.”

“I know.” His head snaps up, and I can see surprise in his eyes. He opens his mouth, as if to say something. “It’s a long story.”

One I don’t care to talk about. He can sense it because he just nods, accepting my answer for what it is, and changes the subject.

“How is your Shakespeare essay coming along?”

We talk a little about our class, him sipping coffee, me cleaning up behind the counter. Only one new customer comes in the meantime, and I quickly whip up their order. Just as I’m giving the girl her change, Nixon’s phone buzzes on the counter.

He picks it up and checks the message. I try to pretend I’m immersed in putting the money in the register and not paying attention to him, but I fail miserably. From the corner of my eye I see him shake his head as he types something back before locking it and returning it to where it was.

“Any plans for tonight?” His question startles me.

Giving up on pretending, I close the register. “Nope. It’ll be me and books...”

The vibration of my own phone in my pocket stops me from finishing. I pull it out and see a text from Callie.

Callie: Dinner @ cafeteria. I won’t accept no for an answer.

Callie: And I know your shift is done soon, so don’t try to lie to me.

I must have sighed louder than I thought because Nixon lifts his brows. “Trouble?”

“If trouble started with C...” He lifts his brows and waits for me to expand. “It’s Callie, she wants me to join them for dinner.”

“You too? Hayden just messaged me to come. You going?”

“Apparently I don’t have much of a choice.”

I turn my phone to him so he can read the message. Nixon laughs, the hard lines of his face relaxing. He’s been so serious lately that I almost forgot about this other side of him. Relaxed and carefree.

“Do you think she’s sitting out there spying on me?” I squint at the dark windows, but between the distance and the darkness it’s hard for me to see anything except the reflection of the café.

“I wouldn’t put anything past Callie. When she sets her mind on something...” He lets his voice trail off. “So, are you going?”

I sigh and look down at the clock. It's almost eight in the evening. "I could use something to eat."

"When are you getting off?"

"In a few..."

"Just about now," Monica's voice says from behind me. She places her hands on my shoulders, giving me a squeeze. "I'll pick it up from here."

"You sure?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "I'm sure I'll be fine. Go."

I throw my finger over my shoulder. "I'll just go and grab my things. Shouldn't be long."

"Take your time."

I see the keys on the counter. Grabbing them, I say, "And thanks for taking care of this for me."

"Anytime."

Another smile.

Another flutter of my heart.

Stop it.

Nodding, I turn around and go back in the kitchen, which is blessedly empty at this hour. Taking a moment to collect myself, I lean against the door and close my eyes.

What the hell is happening to me?

"Look who the cat finally dragged in!" Callie says as she pats the empty chair next to her, but her eyes are glued to the person over my shoulder. "And you brought company."

There is a silent question in her statement I don't miss, but choose to play dumb instead. "You mean Nixon? He was just coming in when I got here."

The man in question raises his brow mockingly, but says nothing. Hey, it was his idea not to say anything to our friends about what happened, not mine.

"Mm-hmm..." Callie doesn't look convinced, but thankfully lets it go.

"Where's Chloe?" I ask, as I sit down and look around the full table. Nixon and I just took the last couple of seats. On the other side of Callie is Hayden talking to Zane, one of his hockey friends that I see around

occasionally, and Prescott. That big dude they call the Hulk is on the other side of the table, his girlfriend sitting on his lap, and there are a couple of other football players I don't know by name sitting around too.

I shake my head at the irony. If only Grace could see me now, she would have a field day.

"Chloe is cramming tonight, she has some kind of test tomorrow she's freaking out about."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Chloe is one of those people who thrives when she does things at the very last moment. She's super smart, and knows random things most people wouldn't give a damn about, but she's all about living off of the adrenaline rush.

"That's Chloe for ya." Callie shrugs, popping a piece of bread in her mouth. "She's been having a hard time with Karen."

"Karen who?" Nixon asks.

"Chloe's bitchy roommate," Callie explains.

"Callie!" I chastise her, but she just shrugs.

"Just calling it as I see it."

She *is* right though. We tried hanging out with her in the beginning, but Karen's so completely different from us that after a while we gave up on trying. She's always looking down her nose at us, and most other people, and cares only about the latest gossip, partying and hot guys.

"What happened now?"

"God only knows. She just said she's had enough, and she'll tell us everything during our next girls' night."

"That should be interesting," I mutter, taking a bite of my own dinner.

"What should?" Hayden asks, peeking at us. Callie explains to him what we were talking about, and then we switch to different topics.

I listen with half an ear while the guys discuss hockey season and the chances that the Blairwood team continues to the Frozen Four.

I lift my gaze and find Nixon watching me.

What? I mouth, at which he just shakes his head.

Nothing.

Then why are you staring at me? I want to ask him, but I can't. Not without raising too many brows in our direction. But seriously, what's with that? Just minutes ago, he was asking me to keep quiet about what happened, and now he's openly staring at me in front of all our friends.

“Did you find out what was wrong with your car?” Callie asks, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“What?”

“Your car? What was wrong with it?”

“Starter died,” Nixon supplies, just as he finished chewing.

“Hmm... And you know that how?”

“Because you sent him to get me?” I give her a pointed glare that has her laughing.

“I asked Zane to have a look at it and help me,” Nixon adds.

Zane lifts his head at the mention of his name. “Huh?”

“Thanks for getting my car fixed, Zane,” I say.

“Oh.” He looks at Nixon, and the two exchange a quick glance. I narrow my eyes at them, but it’s gone before I can think too much about it. “Yeah, sure, no problem.”

We chat for a little while longer. I listen to Callie talk about her latest art class at the community center and the idea she got about making a picture book.

“Ready to go?” somebody asks, and most people nod their agreement.

Together we pick up our things and get up. One by one we discard the used trays, and head outside.

The freezing night air blasts in my face, making me shiver. Snow is slowly falling and adding to the pile covering the ground.

I’m seriously ready for spring to come, but so far winter doesn’t seem to be getting any milder.

“So what’re your plans for tonight?” Callie asks, wiggling her brows. “Hot date? Wait, it’s not Tuesday. Do you meet with Mr. Tuesday on any other day?”

I shove her away. “Shut up. I told you it’s not like that.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s not.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Studying—I have some reading to catch up on, an essay to write, things like that.”

“Booo... You’re no fun.”

“Says Miss I’m-staying-at-my-boyfriend’s-all-the-time,” I mock and throw in an eye roll for good measure. “Who’re you to talk about fun? You’ve been together for like a month, and you’re already acting like an old

married couple.”

“I’ll give you fun, you…”

I don’t see it coming and yet, everything happens as if in slow motion. Callie crouches down, with more agility than I thought possible, and scoops a handful of snow. There is a glint in her eyes as she throws it right at me.

What the hell?

At the last second I manage to dodge it. “Are you insane?”

But Callie’s not looking at me. No, her mouth falls open, and I don’t know if she wants to laugh or freak out. It could be either or none.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, but the chuckle she’s struggling to suppress says she’s anything but.

“Oh man,” Hayden full-on laughs, helping Callie get on her feet.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I find what’s so funny.

Nixon is standing there, wiping the snow off his face. “Now you’ve gone and done it, Cals,” he says slowly, shaking his head.

“Snowball fight!” Emmett booms loudly.

Everything happens at once. One second we’re standing frozen in place, the next people are running around scooping snow in their hands.

Snowballs fly.

I manage to duck another one before I’m hit in the back.

Stumbling, I catch my balance at the last second. Bending down, I scoop a little bit of snow and throw it at Callie, who’s hiding behind Hayden. The ball punches her in the shoulder, forcing her to turn around to look at me.

“It’s all your fault!”

Callie laughs and throws a snowball at me, hitting me in the chest.

“But you’re having fun!”

Her laughter is infectious and I have to admit, she’s right. I don’t remember the last time I just played in the snow like this. Not for years.

I run away from the center of the fight—seriously, these football players are ruthless. They don’t know the meaning of the word “game,” if they’re in, they’re all in and God help the one who comes between them and victory.

I’m hit three more times as I’m trying to find cover of some kind, but I don’t hold back. I serve up some return fire of my own. I miss a lot too. It’s almost pitiful, but Callie is right. I’m having fun.

“Watch out!”

My head snaps to the side just as Nixon crashes into me. Not expecting him to bulldoze me, I lose my balance and fall on the ground with him on top

of me.

The air is knocked out of my lungs from the impact, leaving me breathless.

Our eyes lock, and we just stare at each other.

I open my mouth but no words come out.

He's so close that we're breathing the same air. I can see the smallest of details on his face. Like the little white scar at the end of his right brow. And the fact that today his irises are more gray than blue. Thick lashes surround them, and they're a shade darker than his hair. And his mouth...

Another shiver runs through me, but this time it has nothing to do with the cold creeping under my soaked clothes.

I look to the side, anything just so I don't stare at his *mouth*. Somehow, I'm not sure how, we managed to land behind a bench.

"Well, at least we're covered," I say, turning back to him.

"Yeah." Nixon's voice is rough as his eyes fall down on my mouth. "At least."

My tongue peeks out, sliding over my suddenly dry lips.

He opens his mouth, but then we're attacked by what feels like dozens of snowballs. Nixon's back takes the brunt of it, but I can feel some too.

"Okay, okay. That's enough!" I laugh, lifting my hands in surrender. Well, as much as I can anyway. It feels more like I'm embracing Nixon and pulling him closer. We're plastered together so tightly you'd think we're one.

"You guys know this is a public place, right?" Hayden asks, looking at us from the bench.

"It's all your damn fault so bugger off," Nixon mutters. He gets to his feet and offers me his hand to help me up.

"No funny business."

"You're an idiot, I was just trying to save her from getting a snowball in the face. Nobody wants to deal with a bloody nose."

"Mm-hmm," Callie hums in my ear. "That's exactly how it looked."

"Oh, shut up." I try to swat her on the head, but she's already pulling away.

"I didn't say anything," she laughs and wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, a smug smile on her face.

"You don't have to, it's written all over your face."

"No, honey, it's written all over *your* face."

I look away, because I fear that if I don't I'm going to punch her. "That's

because I'm freaking cold."

Or maybe I should push her into the biggest pile of snow so she can see for herself what cold is.

"Mm-hmm, whatever you say."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NIXON

My phone screen lights up, drawing my attention. I look at it, finding my sister's bright smile facing me. The photo is barely a year old, and it's one of my favorites. I miss the girl she used to be. The last year has robbed us of a lot, but it robbed Jade more than the rest of us, taking away her joy and innocence.

Grabbing the phone off the stack of books, I look around. The library has a no-talking and no-phone policy so it's only to be assumed that if I get caught I'll be banned forever. Not seeing the grumpy face of the main librarian, Mrs. Gibson, or as we affectionately call her, Mrs. G, anywhere around I signal to Prescott I'll be back and duck into the first row of bookcases.

"Hey," I answer quietly when I think nobody can hear me.

"Hey back," she whispers.

"What's up?"

There is a slight pause, and then, "Why are we whispering?"

"I'm at the library," I explain, taking another turn and getting lost between the dusty shelves.

"Oh my, Nix! Breaking the sacred laws of libraries now, are you?" she mocks me, and I can hear the laughter in her voice. It makes the weight that was on my chest lighten, if only a little.

"You just laugh all you want. I'll see you next year."

Jade grows quiet on the other side of the line, and I instantly regret my words. Instead of apologizing, which I know will be no use, I change the subject. "How are things going?"

There is a rustling of sheets in the background, and I can imagine her getting on the bed, pressing her back against the headboard as she pulls her knees close to her chest. She's been doing it for as long as I can remember, her cocoon of safety when everything else is going to shit.

"Jade?"

"It's going," she sighs. "Mom's getting tired more. Painkillers are taking most of the pain off for now, so at least she can sleep."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "How did the doctor's appointment go?"

I wanted to take her, but it clashed with one of my classes, so Mom insisted one of the nurses take her. Of course, Jade didn't want to hear it, so

she was the one who ditched the first half of her classes and took her instead so Mom wouldn't be alone. Seriously, between two bossy women like that I'm surprised I manage to stay sane.

"Nothing's changed."

"That's because she doesn't want to go to chemo. If she'd just..." I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the strands. The slight sting at the back of my head grounds me.

"What do you want me to do, Nixon?"

"Nothing, it's not your fault."

And that's the goddamn truth. Rationally, I know it isn't anybody's fault. Nobody can do anything to change what's happening, no matter how much we try. And chances are, even if she continued with chemo or radiation or *something* it wouldn't make any difference.

"She wants to spend her last months off meds and enjoy what little she has left, we can't take that away from her," Jade says, voicing my thoughts out loud.

"We won't. I'll be home this weekend. Maybe if she's up for it we could go out and... do something."

Jade snuffles on the other side of the line and my heart breaks for her a little. My sister has always been such a cheerful person, but lately it seems all she does is cry. "Yeah, sounds good."

I hear footsteps somewhere in the distance. Swearing silently, I say, "Hey, Smalls, I've gotta go before they throw my ass out in the snow."

"More like in the dungeon," she chuckles softly.

"With how much dust is here, I wouldn't be surprised if one of these rows led to cages. Talk soon?"

"I love you, Nix."

I close my eyes, my heart squeezing painfully. I don't deserve her love. I shouldn't be putting her, *them*, through this. I should be there. I should be their rock holding them tight through this nightmare.

"Love you too," I say quietly, my voice sounding strained even to my own ears. "Kiss Mom for me."

"Will do. Later."

We disconnect the call, and I start back to the study area. I've come farther than anticipated, and with all the rows looking the same I don't even know if I'm going in the right direction.

"Fucking finally," I mutter when I see a stream of light around the corner.

I'm so focused on getting out of the maze of bookshelves, I don't see the backpack on the floor. My foot connects with it, sharp pain running up my leg—*what the fuck is in that thing?*—as I stumble forward. At the last moment I grab the shelf, regaining my balance.

“Seriously? Should you be...”

I turn around to glare at the person who's responsible for almost breaking my leg, but the words die on my lips when I see her.

Yasmin.

The last person I expected to find, yet the first person who appears when I least expect her.

She's lying on the table, her hand tucked under her head, lips slightly parted as she breathes in her sleep. She looks serene as she sleeps, the lines of her face smooth, showing an innocence of sorts that's safely hidden away when she's awake and scowling down at me.

Open books cover the small desk in the corner that's secluded from the rest of the people. She'd probably been studying when she fell asleep.

My legs move before I can think about it, bringing me closer to her.

I should go, I know I should. I'm not in the right mindframe to deal with anybody right now. I should let her be, but the pull she has on me is stronger.

Her hair is loose, falling down her back in a mass of dark curls. It's strange to see it unbound like that when most of the time she tries to tame it, but it suits her. It looks wild, like it has a will of its own. Beautiful, stubborn and fierce. Just like her.

Yasmin shifts slightly, murmuring something, and for a split second I think my almost-fall has woken her, but then she settles down once again.

Books on different topics are scattered over the table. From a quick sweep I find a couple on Shakespeare, some material on early education, and a German textbook; at least, I think it's German. Her laptop is open, but the screen is black, signaling she's been out for a while.

One curl falls in her face, tickling her nose. Chuckling lightly, I brush it away. Her hair is soft underneath my touch, and I can sense the smell of cinnamon and honey surrounding her.

Yasmin sighs happily, and I hate that I'll have to wake her, but I know I can't leave her like this. Even though she's secluded in this little corner, she's still in a public place, and although I'm sure criminals don't frequent libraries you can never be too sure. There're assholes everywhere just waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Lowering my hand to her shoulder, I give her a soft shake. “Rise and shine.”

Yasmin protests something in her sleep; it makes no sense whatsoever, but the stubborn look on her is so cute I can’t help the smile that tips my lips.

Pulling out a chair next to her, I move closer. My fingers tangle in her curls, wrapping one strand around my finger and giving it a soft tug. “Yas-Yas, wake up.”

She groans unhappily, her face turning into a grimace. “Don’t wanna.”

“I can see that but you can’t sleep in the library.”

She blinks a few times, sleep still clinging to her eyes as they open. “Says who?”

“I’m sure Mrs. G would have something to say about it.”

“Mrs. G?”

A frown appears between her brows, and I have this sudden need to rub my thumb over the little crease and smooth the worry lines.

Where the hell did that come from?

I pull back like I’ve been burned, which is silly because I’m not even touching her. Thankfully, Yasmin is too sleepy to notice my weird behavior.

“Mrs. Gibson, the head librarian?”

“You know the head librarian?”

“You don’t?”

Yawning, she sits upright in the chair. “No, I don’t think so. You do?”

“Well, yes. Although she’s not really fond of us.”

Yasmin blinks, her brows rising. “Do I even want to know?”

“How can you not?” Plastering the smile on my face, I lean back in my chair. “So we have these Ravens team study sessions.”

“Oh.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What does that mean?”

“Just oh.” She shrugs.

“Yeah, right.” I don’t believe one word she says. Still glaring at her, I continue, “So we have these sessions and occasionally things get heated.”

“In the library?”

“Well yeah, we’re a passionate bunch.”

“More like Trouble. That’s with a capital T in case you were wondering.”

“Us? No way, we’re angels. Besides, somebody needs to help her get the stick out of her ass. Maybe if the rumors are true and she’s really dating Coa
—”

The words die on my tongue when I see Yasmin's eyes grow wide. It takes me a moment to register what I said that could tick her off.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Yasmin, I'm so sorry, I wasn't thinking..." But she isn't listening. She's already closing her books with more force than necessary, putting them in a pile one on top of the other.

"Nothing to be sorry about," she says coolly, not even looking at me.

I wince when she shuts her laptop. She looks around for her backpack and when she finally sees it, she picks it up and starts shoving what she can into the already-full space. Seriously, it's no wonder the thing almost broke my toe when I hit it.

"It was insensitive, and I shouldn't have said it."

"There is no reason you should have known."

I put my hand over hers, needing her to stop moving, to just look at me. "But I do know."

Yasmin's head snaps up, her wild eyes meeting mine. It's like the air has been sucked out of the room from that one touch. Both of us, this moment, frozen in time.

My throat bobs as I swallow, prickles of awareness rushing just underneath my skin.

Her gaze falls down on our clasped hands. She doesn't say anything, but she also doesn't try to pull away. Her shoulders lift as she inhales deeply, as if to calm herself.

What is she thinking?

I want to know, but it also scares the shit out of me.

Wetting my lips, I force the words out. "I do know, and I should have known better."

"I don't like to talk about him," Yasmin says quietly, still refusing to meet my gaze. "Hell, I don't even like to think about him."

"Did you ever try?" I ask before I can think better of it. Seriously, will I ever learn? But she surprises me when she answers my question.

"No, it was just my mom and I for as long as I can remember, and she didn't like to mention him at all. Can't say I blame her, not now at least."

"Then how did you find out about him?"

Yasmin pulls her hand out of mine. I don't try to reach back for her, no matter how much I crave to do just that. Losing her touch is like I've lost the air to breathe. It rattles me, but she seems to be doing just fine because she

goes right back to packing her things like nothing happened.

“There was this expression on her face. It would appear every time she saw him on TV when he was still playing. Not quite sad, not quite angry, not quite longing, but a little bit of all three? She’d look at him for just a few moments before switching the channel or turning off the TV, until one day I asked her about it.”

“And she told you? She told you who he is to you?”

“We don’t lie to each other.” She snorts, looking away. “At least we didn’t use to.”

I mull over her explanation, trying to understand. How would it be? Having just one parent? Wondering what happened to the other? Looking for answers so you can understand who you are and where you come from?

Yes, my dad is a piece of shit who left us, but he was there. Before. For years. He was there when I was growing up, and I never had to wonder about those things. Never had to question who I am and where I come from.

I want to ask Yasmin more about it, about her mom and her life before she came here, but I feel like I’ve already crossed some line I shouldn’t have. Yasmin and I, regardless of our strange relationship, are doing better, and the last thing I want is to go back to the beginning.

Yasmin looks around, as if to confirm she got all of her things before putting on her jacket. “I should go.”

“Fine, just give me a second to pick up my things.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Ah, ah, ah.” I lift my finger and press it to her mouth. I can feel her soft gasp underneath my fingertip. The softness of her lips, the warmth of her breath, feel the zap of current shoot from her body straight into mine. I pull back, but even without our skin connecting I can still feel the burn. “Do we really have to go over this again? You know I’m going to win.”

“That’s what you’d like to think.” She pats me on the shoulder in passing. “Fine, but I’m leaving in two. So better hustle.”

I shake my head at her, but do as she says. Just a few guys are still sitting at our table when I get there. Prescott lifts his eyebrows when he sees me coming, then his eyes fall over my shoulder, a smirk forming on his lips.

“I’m leaving,” I say, already grabbing my things.

“Yeah, I can see you found yourself something better to do tonight.”

“It’s not like that,” I protest, because really it isn’t. Yasmin and I... we’re complicated. But we definitely aren’t like that. Not that I wouldn’t be game if

she said the word.

“Yeah, sure.”

I don't bother correcting him again. Let the fucker think what he wants.

Quickly grabbing my things, I shove them into my backpack, pull on my jacket and with one final wave of my hand, I'm already on my way.

“So what are my stats—” I'm about to call her coach, but bite my tongue at the last second.

“Late,” she throws over her shoulder, already walking outside.

“Oh, come on! You didn't even check.”

“Don't need to know how slow your ass is. I bet I could outrun you any day of the week.”

I start a moderate jog to catch up with her. “Is that a challenge I hear, Hernandez? 'Cause you say the word and I'm ready to show you how wrong you are.”

“Promises, promises.”

For a while we walk in silence. There are three different libraries on campus but only one is open twenty-four seven and that one's the farthest away from Yasmin's dorm.

“How did you even find me?” Yasmin finally asks. “I don't think anybody knows about that nook, or if they do, they don't like it since it's empty whenever I come.”

The reason behind my impromptu tour of the library comes back to me in a flash, my mood turning sour. “Jade called, so I hid to take the call.”

Yasmin gives me a knowing smile. “How is she?”

I thought it would be hard to share what's going on in my life with my friends, but with Yasmin, it's almost effortless. I want to tell her about what happened. I want to share my worries and see what she thinks because I know she'll actually try and understand.

“As well as she can be. She took Mom to her latest doctor's appointment.”

“And?”

There is hope in her voice, and I hate to be the one to crush it. Yasmin seemed genuinely happy when she was talking with Mom and Jade that day in the kitchen.

“Declining, but at least she's not in a lot of pain. Or so she tries to reassure us.”

“There is really nothing doctors can do?”

I tilt my head back. The sky is dark, with only a few stars strong enough to shine their way through the darkness.

My breath turns foggy as I exhale. “She did try chemo for a while, just after they diagnosed her, but it wasn’t helping. At this point, the tumor’s spread to other organs, and there’s little they can do. She could keep going to treatments—hell, I want her to, I want her to fight, dammit—but the reality is, they wouldn’t help, and she wants to be home, with us.”

Yasmin’s hand grips mine in a fierce hold. I look down at her and find her tear-filled eyes looking at me. The space around us is charged with so much emotion; it’s hard to breathe.

I swallow the lump that’s formed in my throat, concentrating on that one point of contact and letting go of everything else.

“You’re a good son, Nixon.”

“A good son?” A bitter laugh escapes me. There is nothing good about me. “A good son would have taken a break for a year to stay with his family. A good brother wouldn’t let his little sister take the better part of the weight that is taking care of our sick mother on her shoulders.” She opens her mouth to protest, but I stop her with a shake of my head. I need her to understand this, to understand *me*. “I’m not good, Yasmin. I’m a selfish bastard that feels relieved when he leaves for campus because I know that for the next week I won’t have to breathe in the smell of antiseptic and dying. I breathe out in relief because for the next few days I won’t have to see the woman who gave me life, gave me *everything*, wither and die right in front of my eyes, because while she’s the one who’s dying, watching her do it is killing me. So no, I’m not a good son, I’m the farthest away from it I can be.”

Yasmin’s nails dig into my skin, but I welcome the sting of pain they leave in their wake. “Your mom wants you to be happy, to live. And you’re doing that. You’re giving her what she wants.”

“Then why does it feel like I’m betraying her? Betraying *them*?”

Her free hand cups my cheek, the tip of her thumb sliding over my cheekbone. “Because you know that sometimes doing the right thing doesn’t necessarily mean doing the right thing for *you*.”

“I feel so guilty,” I confess quietly, so quietly I’m not even sure she can hear me.

I lean down, pressing my forehead against hers. It’s stronger than me. This need to find solace in something, in somebody. No, not just somebody. In her. Yasmin.

I shouldn't do it, God knows I don't deserve it, but I can't stop myself. I need this. I need somebody to listen. Somebody to *understand*.

Yasmin seems to recognize that. Her hold on me tightens, pulling me closer. Less than an inch separates us as her determined eyes stare into mine.

"I can lie and tell you it'll go away, but I won't. Just try to remind yourself that you're doing it for her. Always for her."

"Always for her," I rasp my agreement.

My throat feels tight with all the pent-up emotions I've been holding back. I slide my thumb over her cheekbone, feeling the softness of her skin. I look into her eyes, taking in her whole face. Her long lashes. A faint dusting of freckles on her cheeks. Her rosy lips.

"What are we doing, Yasmin?"

Her tongue peeks out, sliding over her lower lip. "I—"

Whatever she wanted to say dies on her lips as a group of giggling girls passes next to us, breaking us out of the bubble. We both jump apart like we've been caught doing something wrong.

"Hey, Nixon," they say in unison, waving and winking at me. I'm not sure who they are, most likely fans or groupies or both, but I say hi regardless.

Yasmin takes a step back, pushing her hair behind her ear. She's avoiding eye contact, and I can't blame her. I'm not sure what's happening here, but I know I'm not ready for it. Not with everything else I have going on right now. Yasmin is the kind of girl who deserves the world, and I can't give that to her. Not when my own world is falling apart.

"I should go."

My instant reaction is to ask her to stay, that's the reason why I know I should let her go.

"Yeah," I agree. "Goodnight, Yasmin."

"Night, Nixon."

I watch her climb the stairs and press her card to the door. There is a low buzz as the front door unlocks. She grips the door and stops. I think she might turn around. I wait for it. Long for it. Long for just one more glimpse at her eyes. For the solace and understanding I'll find in them. But she just shakes her head, and goes inside while I keep staring at the closed door long after she's gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

YASMIN

“Hey, sorry I’m la—” I stop in my tracks when I see Callie and Chloe twirl toward me. Both of them are dressed to the nines, with sexy dresses, silky hair and flawless makeup. “What is this?”

“You came!” Chloe rushes over and gives me a hug. “I thought you were ditching us.”

“Just got caught up after class.” I give her a once-over. She’s wearing a tight pink number that matches the pink strand in her otherwise dark hair. She calls it her rebel lock. I’m not sure what she means by it, but it looks cute on her. “You going somewhere? I thought we had our monthly tequila and tacos night.”

“About that...”

The two exchange a silent look.

“What am I missing here?”

Even Callie is wearing a dress. It’s less confining than Chloe’s, falling down in a straight line until just above the knee. The royal blue color makes her eyes stand out. And she even ditched the leggings this time around, instead opting for a sheer pair of tights. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her in something that doesn’t cover her from head to toe.

“There’s this new club that just opened in the next town over so we figured we might go and check it out,” Chloe explains excitedly.

I lift my brows. “Without me?”

“We were waiting for you!” She grabs the strap of my backpack and pulls it off my shoulder. Forcing me to turn around, she gives me a little push between my shoulder blades. “Off you go, take a shower, and in the meantime we’ll find you something to wear.”

“This is an ambush!” I protest half-heartedly when Callie lifts my shower caddy and hands it to me.

“Just good friends taking care of each other. Go!”

Then with one push at my back, I’m shoved out of my own room.

My hips start swaying to the strong beat of the bass as soon as we enter the

darkness of the club. Chloe winks at the bouncer who just let us through, barely glancing at our fake IDs before the door shuts behind us.

Different colored lights illuminate the space as the familiar tunes of top forty hits fill my ears. A group of giggling girls crashes into us as they're leaving, barely giving us a second glance.

"Bar!" Chloe shouts at us over the loud music. Locking our hands together, so we don't get separated, we move through the crowd toward the back of the room.

Just like the rest of this place, the bar is packed, but Chloe finds a way to squeeze herself between people and gets the attention of the bartender pretty quickly.

Seriously, that girl means business.

"A round of tequila shots!" She turns to wink at us. "Tonight, we're celebrating."

"Anything in particular?" I ask, barely hiding my laugh at her eagerness. She's been bouncing on the balls of her feet almost since I got back from the shower but refused to say anything until we got here.

"My geniusness," Chloe interjects, pushing a shot glass into each of our hands. "Bottoms up, girls."

I tip the glass back, letting the lukewarm liquid slide down my throat. My whole body shudders at the burn as I bite into a slice of lemon Chloe produced from somewhere.

"God, this is strong," Callie says, shivering and voicing my own thoughts.

"Only the best, since we're celebrating."

"Will you finally tell us what exactly we are celebrating?"

"I've finally had it with Karen. Having a sex marathon when she *knew*—you know, because I made a point of telling her?—I needed some peace and quiet to prepare for a quiz for my class was the final straw. And of course, it was just that day that I forgot to bring all the books I needed with me, so I *had* to get into my room to pick them up anyhow."

There is a menacing glint in her eyes that has me wincing. Seriously, I never want to get on Chloe's bad side, like ever.

"What did you do?"

Chloe signals the bartender for another round. "Oh, I might have added a little something to her shampoo."

"Oh. My. God."

"You didn't."

“That’s some serious *Mean Girls* shit.”

Callie and I exchange a look. Partly horrified, partly ecstatic.

“Oh, I did. I’m surprised you didn’t hear her shriek. I think the whole hallway shook when she saw her reflection in the mirror after her shower.”

I shake my head at her, laughing. “You’re so, so bad.”

“I can be even worse.” A self-satisfied smirk flashes on her face. “She deserved it, I couldn’t wait for her to catch an STD or some shit like that, which will happen eventually. You know I’m not a mean person, and I hate slut-shaming, but I’ve had it with her. I tried to play nice, I really did, but the more time passed, the crazier she made me. It’s insane.”

I can’t blame her.

“Does she know it’s you?” Callie asks, nibbling at the salt coating the edge of her glass.

Chloe shrugs. “Not like she can do anything to prove it, now can she?”

“True.” I nudge Callie. “See what you could have ended up with? You should be singing my praises.”

Callie pokes her tongue out at me. “That’s what you’d like to think.”

“Now, now.” Chloe shoves between the two of us, acting like some sort of shield, although I’m not sure who she’s protecting. “No need to get your girlmance all in my face.”

“Aww, look at her,” Callie says, trying to imitate Chloe’s stubborn, although slightly irritated pout.

“I think she might cry.” I laugh and lift my glass to her lips. “C’mon, chica. Let’s drown your sorrows in tequila.”

“And dance,” Chloe adds, downing what’s left in my glass. “Definitely dance. Maybe I’ll find somebody tonight and have a sex marathon in our room.”

“That would serve her right.”

“Maybe you should try and find a guy she’s been pining after but couldn’t get. Rub it in her face and all.”

Chloe ponders it for a moment. “That’s actually not such a bad idea.”

“Callie?”

We turn around and come face to face with a stunning redhead. If I thought Callie and Chloe were dressed up, they have nothing on her. She has a little black dress on that hugs her every curve and high heels that make her legs seem like they’re a mile long. And, are there diamonds hanging off her ears? Because they look too damn sparkly to be anything but.

“Alyssa! What are you up to?” Callie asks, pulling her in for a quick hug.

“Just having some fun.” Alyssa looks at us over Callie’s shoulder. She looks vaguely familiar, although I’m not sure where to place her. “No guys tonight?”

“Nope, it’s just us girls.”

“Hayden, let you off the hook?” she asks, clearly surprised. Not that I can blame her, even I was shocked for a moment. The two have been attached at the hip since they got together, but they both seem happy so who am I to judge?

“He isn’t like that.” Callie shoves her away playfully. “Besides, he should be able to survive one night without me.”

Alyssa throws her head back and laughs. “Sweet. You girls should join us. We have a table just over there.” Alyssa points in the direction of a secluded area at the back. It seems like it’s separated from the rest of the club. A VIP area?

Callie looks at us over her shoulder, silently asking what we think.

“The more the merrier, right?” Chloe agrees with a shrug, and I nod my agreement.

“Just gimme a second, and we’ll get you settled, and then we can go and have some fun on the dance floor.”

I watch as Alyssa goes to the bartender, and they talk for a few minutes. She’s a merciless flirt, but the guy doesn’t seem to mind one bit. Who can blame him? She’s stunning. With her long red hair bouncing off her shoulders, bright blue eyes accentuated by flawless makeup and a little black dress, she’s every guy’s wet dream. Probably some girls’ too.

“Who’s that Alyssa chick?” I lean in to whisper into Callie’s ear. “The more I try to think about it, the more I can’t place her, but I know I have to have seen her somewhere.”

“Probably at Hayden’s. She’s Maddox’s friend so she hangs around occasionally.”

“Right! I knew I’d seen her, but I couldn’t remember from where.”

Before Callie can say anything else, Alyssa is back.

“All done, let’s go.”

Alyssa leads the way to the back, and just like I suspected, it’s a VIP area. Big leather booths dominate the space, the light is dim, and there is more air to breathe since there are fewer people here.

“One of my friends knows the owner so she scored us the booth,” Alyssa

explains with a playful wink over her shoulder.

Three girls are sitting in the booth when we get there, talking and laughing. They all look gorgeous, making me feel thankful that I let Chloe boss me into one of my best dresses, although at the time, it seemed silly. It's just a club in a smallish town in New England. But the dresses and heels Alyssa and her friends are wearing aren't something you'll find in the local Target, that's for sure.

Alyssa makes the introductions, and just as we sit down a waiter comes with a tray of shots. Alyssa lifts hers in the air as each of us takes her drink. "To an amazing night, girls!"

We all cheer in agreement as we down the shots.

Chloe jumps to her feet and pulls us up. "C'mon, let's get this booty movin'."

By now the dance floor is even more cramped than it was when we arrived. We barely manage to squeeze between the masses of people. We're so squashed together, our bodies grind against one another, but we don't care. With a few shots in our systems our inhibitions are already lowered. We dance together, our hips swaying to the beat of the music. Closing my eyes, I lift my arms in the air, letting the melody overflow my senses.

One night.

Just one night, and then I'll go back to being a good girl, a responsible student, and daughter.

But tonight, I get to be young and free.

One song turns into two. Two into three. After that, I stop counting.

"Oh, I love this one," Callie squeals loudly when the familiar beat of Enrique Iglesias's older hit fills the room.

"This one and then I seriously need to pee!" Chloe yells loudly so we can hear her over the music.

I nod my agreement just as a hand slides over my hip. I turn around and come face to face with a guy.

"Dance with me."

It's not a question, but I nod regardless. The hand that's already on my hip slides to the small of my back, pulling me closer, as his other one nestles on my waist.

I let him lead, matching the sway of my hips to his. His eyes bore into mine as we move in the limited space we have.

He's cute, around my age or maybe a few years older. His light hair is

neatly styled and matches the dress shirt with rolled sleeves and dark jeans he's wearing perfectly, giving him a preppy vibe. If fraternities were a thing at Blairwood, he'd be the perfect candidate to join one.

He moves closer as the tempo increases, his thigh slipping between my legs as he leans closer. I turn my head to the side just a little bit, his lips brushing against my cheek, his warm breath touching my earlobe as he whispers in my ear, "I've been watching you all night."

"Oh yeah? Like what you see?"

His heated eyes give me an appraising look. "You have no idea."

My red lips tip up in a half smile. I'm debating on what to do when the song ends, and I feel somebody pinch my elbow. Looking over my shoulder, I find Callie and Chloe looking at me. Chloe tips her head toward the back of the club.

Toilet, right.

Facing the nameless guy, I offer him an apologetic smile as I start to pull back. "Duty calls."

He looks over my shoulder and then back at me. "Find me later?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. He's too handsome and charming for his own good. "I might take you up on that."

That seems to appease him somewhat, and he lets me go. I let Callie pull me through the people toward the back. Only when we're a safe distance away do the girls squeal loudly.

"What the hell was that?"

"Fire alert!"

I shove them away. "You both are insane."

"Does that mean you're done with Mr. Tuesday?"

I groan loudly as we enter the dark hallway. The music here is slightly lower so we don't have to scream to be heard.

"I already told you, there is no Mr. Tuesday."

"So are you going to look for Mr. Hottie later?" Callie asks, wiggling her brows.

Intense blue-gray eyes flash in my mind. The weight of his forehead pressed against mine. The scruffiness of his cheeks underneath my palms.

Memories flash in my mind one after the other in quick succession. I shake my head, pushing them back.

Baby blond hair and bright blue eyes, that's who you should be thinking about. It doesn't matter if they don't make your stomach clench at just the

thought of him.

“I just might.”

The bathroom is busy, per usual, so we have to wait a little before taking our turn. Once we're done, we stop at the bar to order a round of drinks.

Our table is full when we get there. Two of Alyssa's friends are snuggled against two guys I don't know while, Alyssa and another friend of hers, Bianca, I think, are chatting animatedly with three other guys. They turn around when they see us coming, and I come face to face with the blond preppy guy from earlier. He grins as he takes me in from head to toe.

“You're back.”

“And you have company,” Chloe says, elbowing me in the ribs as she wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. Seriously, can she be more obvious? I glare at her, but she just laughs as she slides down into the booth next to the girls with Callie right after her. Which leaves the only open seat next to the blond guy and his friend.

“Yes. Girls, these are Lucas, Mario, and Tim. We met them at another party just recently.”

“Lucas,” the blondie says, taking my hand in his.

“Yasmin,” I reply, returning his handshake.

“It's nice to meet you, Yasmin.” He holds on to my hand longer than necessary, his thumb sliding over the inside of my wrist, drawing slow circles. Gooseflesh spreads over my skin at his touch.

I lift my gaze from our joined hands to his face. “Likewise.”

Things have just gotten interesting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NIXON

Descending the stairs, I go straight for the kitchen, but the light in the living room catches my attention, making me stop in my tracks. I walk back and peek through the open door to find Hayden sitting on the couch and watching some stupid reality show.

“Did hell freeze over?”

“What are you talking about?”

Going inside, I lean against the doorjamb. “You. Sitting here alone. Moping.”

“I’m not moping, asshole.” He throws one of the sofa cushions—courtesy of Callie—at me, but I duck it safely.

“Not at all. Where’s your prettier half?”

I don’t remember when the last time was that I’d seen him without Callie. They’ve been inseparable since they came back from winter break, with Callie spending most of her time at the house.

“Girls’ night.”

“Oh, this is good.” I laugh, and the scowl on his face deepens. “You got ditched, and now you’re pouting in the dark.”

“Not pouting.”

“Yeah, try saying that again. Maybe this time your lip won’t wobble like you’re about to cry.”

“You’re just a jealous dickhead, Cole. Why don’t you go and find yourself a girlfriend?”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t ditch me for a girls’ night,” I throw over my shoulder as I go to the kitchen. I find a six-pack in the fridge, take two and return to the living room, where Hayden is channel surfing or stabbing the remote, depending on how you look at it.

“Here.” I throw the can at him, and he catches it almost effortlessly. “Maybe that will help you keep your panties straight.”

“I hate you.”

“You wish you could, but I’m too charming to hate. So where is the missus tonight? Not like it’s hard to find a better offer than to hang out with you.”

“Fuck you.” He pops the lid open and takes a swig. “Chloe found out about some new club opening so they’re going.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You let her go to a club? Alone?”

“Yes, I did. I’m not her handler.”

“There are assholes there that will want to dick her. You sure you’re up for it?”

“Callie isn’t like that, and you know it.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about Callie.”

His phone beeps, and he lunges at it like it’s on fire. I just lean against the couch, my hands spread over the back of it as I watch him, sipping on my own beer.

Hayden grins at whatever message appeared on his screen. The dumbass only gets that smile when he’s talking to two people, Callie and his Grams, and since the latter is probably sleeping since it’s already past midnight, I think it’s safe to assume it’s Callie.

But the smile slips from his lips almost as quickly as it appeared. “What the fuck?”

“What?”

I let my legs fall off the coffee table and look at his phone. True enough, Callie texted him. Her message is a mess that I’m not sure I even want to decipher. But what probably got his attention is the photo attached below.

The photo is of the girls, all right. Chloe, Callie, Yasmin, and Alyssa of all people, in addition to some other girls I don’t know—although based on how they look, they’re Alyssa’s friends—all smiling happily for the camera. But that’s not what has his attention, or mine—it’s the group of guys that’s sitting next to them cozily snuggled up.

What the hell?

One particular fucker draws my attention. Mr. All-American who’s holding Yasmin so close she’s practically sitting in his lap.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

The beer I’ve been drinking suddenly tastes sour in my mouth. My fingers dig deeper into the couch, knuckles turning white.

“Fuck this.” Hayden jumps to his feet.

“Fuck what?” Zane stops in the hallway, and looks at us, a permanent scowl on his face.

“I’m going to get her,” Hayden says, already slipping on his shoes and jacket.

“Get who?”

“Callie,” I explain, getting to my feet and following after Hayden. “You

coming or what?”

The drive seems to take forever. Hayden wanted to take the car, but Zane was the one who insisted we grab an Uber instead. Thankfully one was just a few minutes out because I'm not sure Hayden would have waited if it were longer. Nor was I sure *I* could do it.

What the hell was she doing with that guy?

I couldn't get that stupid photo out of my head. I'm not sure I ever saw Yasmin with a guy before, but he doesn't seem like her type. Not that I know what her type is, but she wouldn't go for a guy that's basically a real-life Ken doll, right? He's just too smug, too full of himself, too... polished, I guess? The fuck if I know. What I do know is that seeing them together screamed *all wrong*.

The roads are deserted since it's the middle of the night, so the ride doesn't take too long, and it turns out it's a good thing we didn't take the car since the parking lot is packed to the brim.

“You two are insane, you know that?” Zane laughs at us as we get out of the car in a hurry and start toward the club. There are people mingling outside, talking and smoking. Some of them recognize us and call our names in greeting, but we don't stop to chat.

Hayden seems like a man on a mission, and I can't say I blame him.

“Then why did you come with us?” Hayden grumbles, ignoring the queue and going straight for the door.

Zane chuckles. “Oh, there is no way I'm missing the show.”

“Fucker.”

“I do get why he's here, but what's your deal?” Those light eyes turn to me, not missing anything.

“Same as you.” I shrug, trying to play it cool. Because honestly I have no idea what the hell I'm doing at all. I just knew when I saw that photo that I couldn't stay back.

Zane observes me quietly for a moment as a knowing smirk slowly spreads across his face. “Yeah, right.”

“Whatever, man.”

I speed up, just in time to catch the last of the bouncer's words. “Do you

know how many guys come to me with the same story?” He shakes his head. “Sorry, dude. No can do.”

“I’m not fucking you. My girl’s inside and...”

“Declan, that you bro?” Zane asks, shoving Hayden out of his way.

“Zane, my man, what’s up?”

The two fist-bump and exchange some pleasantries. “You think you can hook us up? My friend here really needs to see his girl before his panties twist too far up his ass.”

The bouncer gives us an appraising look. “Your friend won’t cause trouble?”

“No way, he’s solid.”

The big dude sighs, but takes a step back. “You owe me.”

“How about tickets to next week’s game?”

“Make it the one after that, and we’re good.”

“Sounds good.” They do another fist-bump as we enter. “Thanks, man.”

The hallway falls into darkness as the door closes behind us. The music is blasting, and we follow the sound of it, the flashing lights coming from down the narrow space.

“How do you know that guy?”

Zane shrugs. “We come from the same part of town,” is his only explanation.

I nod my head in understanding, although in reality I don’t know shit. We’ve been hanging out for two years now, and the guy’s still a mystery to me. Hell, I’m not sure how much Hayden knows and those two are thick as thieves.

When we get to the door, we’re faced with a huge crowd taking most of the space. The loud bass is echoing off the walls, and people are grinding all over each other to the beat of the music on the dance floor.

“So where do you think they are?” Zane asks, yelling over the music. We scan the space but there are too many people to be sure.

“Let’s go this way.” Hayden points to the left and off we go.

I use my height as an advantage to look over the people, but the play of light and dark makes it hard to see clearly. We’re almost at the bar when I see Hayden head into the crowd. He pushes people away until he reaches Callie. She looks over her shoulder, turning around so quickly she almost falls, but he’s already holding her. Chloe is with them, but there is no sign of Yasmin.

My eyes scan the space around them, looking for the familiar dark curls. I

do a full sweep of the crowd and then back. Just when I'm about to give up, I spot her. The blond guy from the photo is standing in front of her, hiding her from me. His hands are gripping her hips as they dance together.

"Same as me, huh?" Zane slaps me on the chest.

"Fuck off, dude."

He just laughs. "I'm going to grab a beer. The view should be excellent from the bar."

With that he's gone, and I'm left standing alone, my eyes glued to the girl with bright red lips, her head thrown back as she laughs at whatever the preppy asshole said.

I grit my teeth, my hands clenching by my sides.

She's not yours, you can't do anything. Let her be.

I know that, I do. I should turn around and go find Zane. Order a beer while we wait for Hayden to pack up his girl and go back home, but my feet are glued to the spot, eyes following her every move.

The asshole brushes a strand of her hair behind her ear and I know, I just know, he'll go in for the kill.

I'd do it too.

"Fuck that," I mutter, getting ready to take a step forward when a hand wraps around mine, halting me.

"Nix! I didn't know you'd be here."

I turn around and look down at the blonde. Amy? Annie? Ann? Something like that. I'm not sure which one, and at this point, I really don't care.

Will he be kissing her if I look their way?

"A spur of the moment decision."

"You with the team?" Her greedy eyes are already scanning the space in hopes of seeing some of my teammates.

"Just Hayden." I can see her face fall, but then she shakes her head as if to remind herself I'm still here, so I add in a rush, "We're just picking up Hade's girl and her friends."

"Well, you can have a drink." She slides her hand over my forearm. "Since you're here and all."

Fuck. Does she really have to be so insistent?

"I'm not sure..."

A hand touches my shoulder tentatively, and I turn around to see Yasmin looking at me. "Nixon? What are you doing here?"

She looks even more gorgeous up close like this. Her makeup is minimal, the main focus those damn red lips that make the natural fullness of her mouth stand out, begging somebody to kiss her.

Me, begging *me* to kiss her.

They don't look kissed though. Is that just my wishful thinking or is the guy that big of a useless prick that he doesn't know how to kiss a girl right?

"Hayden came to pick up Callie."

The frown on her forehead deepens. "Why? Is something wrong?"

She starts turning around, looking for Callie. Shaking off the girl still clinging to me, I put my hands on her shoulders, stopping her. "Everything's fine. They're there." I turn her in the direction where Hayden and Callie are standing and swaying from side to side, her head resting on his chest. "See?"

She looks at them for a moment before turning to face me, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Then why are you here?"

Because I couldn't bear the thought of you going home with a guy that's not me.

The words come out of nowhere, throwing me off guard.

I inhale sharply, my chest burning like a train has just run into me.

Thankfully, I didn't voice them out loud, because there was no way I'd be able to explain it to her. Hell, I can't explain it to myself.

I scratch at the nape of my neck, uncomfortable under her probing gaze. "Hayden didn't like the photo Cals sent him, so he decided to come."

Her eyebrows shot up. "He didn't like the photo? Oh, I see. His inner Neanderthal decided to come out and play."

"He..." But I don't get to finish because somebody crashes into her. Yasmin loses her balance and falls into me. I wrap my arms around her, steadying her. Her hands close around my waist, her head leaning into the crook of my neck.

My heart speeds up at her proximity, the *thump-thump-thump* ringing in my ears. Even with the hot and stiff club air, I can smell the sweet scent of honey and cinnamon that's all Yasmin. It envelops me completely, entering my every pore.

I look down at her, pushing her hair behind her ear so I can see her face. Her eyes are glassy and slightly unfocused, a mix of alcohol and tiredness.

"He was just worried," I say softly, pulling her a little closer.

Unable to resist, I brush the back of my hand against her cheekbone, relishing in the feel of her soft skin underneath my fingertips.

Yasmin inhales softly, her lips forming a perfect O. I want to lean down and wipe that stupefied look off her face with my mouth. Just a few inches separate us. It would be so easy. So freaking easy to close the distance and claim that stubborn mouth of hers.

I swallow, fighting the need to do it.

A movement over her shoulder catches my attention. The guy she's been with is coming straight at us. I give him my most menacing glare so he knows to fuck off. He takes two more steps before changing his direction.

Stupid fucker.

Yasmin stabs her finger in my chest, drawing my attention back to her. "Yeah, right. He just didn't want others to play with his toy. I know how you guys work." She squirms at me. "Still doesn't explain what you are doing here?"

"I'm moral support."

"I don't think I believe you." She moves back a little to be able to glare at me.

"This face?" I give her my most innocent smile. "You don't believe it?"

"Not. One. Bit," she says slowly and sways on her feet. I pull her closer once again, steadying her.

"Are you okay? How much did you have to drink?"

"Not nearly enough."

I shake my head at her. "You're something else."

She tips her head back. "Why does that sound like a bad thing?"

I open my mouth to reply, but we're interrupted.

"You guys ready to go?" Hayden asks, his hand draped over Callie's shoulder. She's already half asleep, or maybe she's just drunk, her whole body tucked into Hayden's side.

"You going?" I ask Yasmin.

She presses her lips in a tight line, and I'm sure she'll give us an earful. "What about Chloe?"

"She's with Alyssa and her friends. Said she'll stay a little while longer."

Yasmin thinks about it and then finally nods. "Okay, let's go."

Hayden pulls Callie toward the exit, and we follow behind. Out in the hallway the girls stop to pick up their coats in the coat check. Zane magically appears when we're almost at the door, and together we go out into the cool night.

A few Ubers are parked on the curb in front of the club, waiting for folks

to be ready to go home. We stop in front of a Honda, but there is no way we'll all fit inside.

Callie murmurs something that has Hayden turning around. His eyes land on Yasmin for a bit, before they meet mine. "You've got her?"

"I've got her." I nod.

Waving them off, I pull Yasmin closer. She's the perfect height for me, her body fitting just right under my arm.

I lead her to a car parked a few yards away. I nod to the guy as I help Yasmin slide inside so she doesn't slam her head against the door jamb before getting inside after her.

"C'mon, let's get you home."

Giving Yasmin's address to the driver, I lean against the seat. She's already snoozing by the time we pull away. Her body molds into my side, her head leaning against my shoulder.

The drive back to campus is quiet. I look down to watch Yasmin's sleeping face. The lines of her face are soft, her expression innocent.

Unable to resist it, I graze my fingertips over her cheek. She murmurs something softly, nuzzling into my touch. The pressure in my chest rises, a vice grip tightening over my heart.

"We're here," the driver says, interrupting the quiet. He eyes Yasmin's sleeping form and then me. I open the door before shaking Yasmin's shoulder. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

Yasmin murmurs something incoherently, making me chuckle.

"You've got to help me here, beautiful."

"Don't wanna," she protests, burrowing her head into the crook of my neck more firmly.

"I think I heard that one before. C'mon, let's get you to bed."

Finally she blinks her eyes open. They're so dark they appear almost black. Like two bottomless pools ready to swallow me whole.

Yasmin reaches forward, her fingers brushing against stubble and cupping my face. "Are you coming with me?"

I swallow hard, unsure of what to say. Unsure of what she's asking of me.

It's been a long night and she's been drinking. Get a grip. Put her to bed and get the fuck out of there.

"C'mon, let's go."

Sliding out of the car, I walk around to her side to help her out. She's a little unsteady on her feet, so I wrap my arm around her to firmly hold her.

Thanking our driver one last time, I shut the door and steer Yasmin toward the dorm.

“Where’s your key?”

She lifts her little bag that’s hanging off her shoulder. I grab it and peek inside, but almost instantly something falls out.

Shit. How many things can one put in such a small bag?

A fucking lot.

Cursing quietly, I squat down, pick up a tube that fell, and shove it back in the bag. Stopping in my tracks so I don’t lose anything else on the way, I go through the contents of the bag until I finally find the key, which of course was at the bottom of the damn thing. Only once the bag is closed do we resume walking.

The hallways are quiet when we get inside. There is nobody sitting at the front desk, which doesn’t surprise me in the slightest.

“Third floor, right?”

Yasmin nods sleepily.

Slowly we make our way up. Once we’re on her floor, I let her lead me all the way down the hallway until we reach her room.

I wait, watching her put the key in. She turns the key, a faint *click* echoing in the empty hallway.

You got her home, now get the hell out.

My hands clench by my sides, but my feet don’t move.

“Nixon?” she asks, still facing the door, but doesn’t make the move to push it open.

“Yeah?” I croak, my voice coming out rougher than intended.

“Why did you come tonight?”

“I already told you. Hayden...”

She turns around to face me. “That’s bullshit, and we both know it.”

There isn’t a trace of the sleepy girl from the cab, now she’s wide awake and waiting for answers. Answers I can’t give her.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

She stares at me, not saying a word. Her face is hard, unreadable, and I wish I knew her better so I’d know what’s going through her mind. But Yasmin Hernandez has been a mystery since the moment I met her. An enigma I wanted to figure out, but could never quite do it.

Finally she takes a step toward me, and then another, until we’re toe to

toe.

“Did you have fun scaring Lucas away?”

“A lousy name for a lousy dude,” I mutter, not even pretending not to know who she’s talking about.

She just lifts her brows. “Like Nixon’s better?”

“Hell yeah.” My finger slides under her chin, tipping it upward as I slide my thumb just under her lips. They part slightly as her breath hitches. “At least when I kiss a girl, she looks like it.”

“Maybe because he didn’t kiss me.”

I narrow my eyes, unsure if I believe her. “He was going to.”

I know he was going to, unless he chickened out at the very last moment. Then he’s even dumber than I originally thought.

Her hands fall to my chest, easing their way to my shoulders. “I didn’t let him.”

“Don’t mess with me,” I warn quietly, my grip on her tightening.

She tilts her head to the side, her fingers tracing the outline of my shoulders. “Messing with you is the last thing I want.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

I stumble back, completely thrown off guard by her request. But Yasmin doesn’t give me a chance to refuse her. Her hand skims to the back of my neck, her nails grazing my skin on their way and making goosebumps appear on my skin. She pulls me down, her mouth crashing against mine as she kisses me.

A soft moan escapes her as our mouths meet. Her lips are even softer than I imagined, and I imagined it a lot. More often than I’d like to admit, she’d sneak into my dreams late at night.

She’s kissing me with fervor, like every minute, every touch counts. Like this is the only chance she’ll get, and she doesn’t want to lose even a second.

Gripping the back of her neck, I tilt her head to the side. She nibbles at my lower lip, her teeth sinking into my flesh. Pain and pleasure crash into me like a wave.

Her tongue slides over my lower lip, soothing the pain away, and I use this moment to mesh my tongue with hers. Her mouth parts, and my tongue slides into her velvet heat, deeper, harder. Our tongues swirl together, tasting, sliding, sucking.

“We should stop,” I murmur, breaking the kiss.

We're both panting hard, fighting for every ragged breath. Yasmin's back is pressed against the door, her chest arching into me. Her lipstick is smeared all over her mouth, her mouth looking plump and thoroughly kissed just like it should, and I'm sure I don't look any better.

"We should," she agrees readily, but makes no attempt to pull back.

My grip at the nape of her neck tightens, silky strands of her hair intertwining with my fingers.

"This is wrong."

So, so wrong.

"But it feels so damn good."

That it does.

I'm so fucking screwed.

But do I stop?

Not a chance in hell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

YASMIN

Nixon Cole tastes like mint, beer, and a lot of bad decisions. Kissing him should be the last thing I want to do. He's infuriating and overbearing to the point he drives me crazy, but I can't seem to help myself. I just want to sink into him and let go.

I open the door to my room. Taking a step back, I pull him after me. Once the door is safely shut after us, I push him against the now-closed door and kiss him once again, not holding anything back.

If I'm going to do this, I might as well go all in.

I guess I could always blame it on the alcohol, but I don't want to.

Because the truth is, I want him.

I want Nixon Cole, everything else be damned.

"You've been drinking," he protests as if he can read my mind. He pulls back from me, making me groan in frustration.

"Not nearly enough."

"But..."

Gripping his face with my hands, I force him to look at me. We haven't bothered to turn on the lights so the room is pitch black, but I don't care one bit. "No buts. I know exactly what I'm doing."

"And what are you doing?"

"I'm getting rid of this." I slide my hand under his shirt and tug it upward, revealing his perfectly sculpted chest. Nixon's more on the lean side compared to the rest of the football players, but not less muscled. His shoulders are wide, every muscle well defined.

I slide my hand down his narrow waist and over his abs, my finger tracing the ridges and counting two, four... six perfect squares.

His muscles quiver under my touch, making a small smile tip my lips.

I unbuckle his pants slowly, and when I look up, I find Nixon watching me. His teeth are grazing over his lower lip as he follows my every movement.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Just one night," I say softly.

I watch him as my words sink in. Needing him to know that this can only be that. One night. One beautiful, reckless moment. One chance to forget all of our worries. That's all I have to give. All I *can* give him.

Nixon is quiet for a moment, his light eyes piercing into mine in the darkness.

“Just one night,” he agrees finally.

It’s like saying those words out loud has unleashed something inside of him. Getting rid of his jeans in a quick movement, Nixon pushes off the wall and stalks toward me with the ruthless determination I’ve seen him use on the field. His hand digs into my hair, pulling me in for a strong kiss as he walks us backward to my bed.

In our haste I trip over something on the floor, but thankfully the room is small so the bed is already behind me, taking in my fall. Nixon falls on top of me, bracing most of his weight on his outstretched arm.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I latch my mouth onto the crook of his neck, tasting his skin with a swipe of my tongue.

“You’re driving me insane, you know that?”

His hips press into mine, and I can feel the outline of his hard dick rubbing against me. My whole body shudders at the touch, my inner walls clenching with the need to feel him inside me.

Díos. My head falls back, eyes closing as he grinds his hips into mine. *It’s been so long. Too damn long since I felt a man’s hands on me.*

Nixon bends his head down, his lips kissing a path down my neck, over the swells of my breasts, only stopping when the top of my dress gets in the way.

He groans unhappily, his fingers digging into my hips. “Up.”

I do as he asks, arching off the mattress so I can help him get the dress off. It slides off in one swift movement, cool air caressing my skin and making goosebumps rise on my flesh. And then Nixon’s hands are on my bare skin, his rugged fingertips sliding down my sides. Warmth pools in my belly at his touch.

“So fucking beautiful,” he mutters, lowering his head to my breasts and picking up where he left off. His hands cup my breasts, pushing them together as he licks my lace-clad nipple, every once in a while letting his teeth graze the sensitive tip.

“Nixon,” I moan softly, my fingers tangling in his hair as I push up, anything to get closer to him.

He switches between my breasts, giving the same attention to the other, and then sucking it into his mouth.

“Yes!”

The combination of his tongue and the lace on my skin has me trembling in his arms. Pulling back, he looks down as his fingers trace the lacy trim.

“Pretty,” he tsks. “Shame it has to go.”

His finger slides between the hollow of my breasts, and with one flick of his fingers the cups spring open.

“Now this,” he rasps, his rough fingers tracing the underside of my breasts, making my skin prickle in awareness. “This is beautiful.”

His mouth sucks on one nub, pulling it deep in his mouth. If I thought Nixon’s mouth on me was good before, this is heaven. My fingers dig into his hair, pulling him closer, head falling back as the sweet ecstasy washes over me. He switches from one side to the other, sucking, tongue flicking over each sensitive bud until I can’t take it any longer. My hips are restlessly grinding under him. He must sense it too, because he starts going lower, leaving small kisses over my abdomen all the way down to...

“*Fuck.*” My body jolts as his mouth kisses my mound, his fingers rubbing me over the lace. I can feel the wetness between my legs coat the sheer material of my panties. And if I can feel it, he can feel it too. “More.”

“Hell, yes.”

Tucking his fingers under the elastic, he pulls the panties off and throws them somewhere into the darkness. And then he’s back between my legs, his mouth on my pussy.

There is no teasing with him, it’s like he’s a man on a mission. His tongue laps from top to bottom, swirling around my opening before he dives in. My fingers clench into fists as I try to hold on to a little bit of sanity, but he drives me crazy in the best way possible, and I don’t want this to end.

His tongue flicks over my clit that’s pulsing with need, before he sucks it into his mouth. At the same time, he slides two fingers inside me.

“Ah.”

Full. He makes me feel so fucking full, and he’s not even inside me. But even this isn’t enough.

“Nixon,” I moan, desperately trying to cling to... something.

“So fucking wet,” he hums against my pussy. His mouth, his warm breath and tongue, it’s all just so much.

“Please,” I plead, not even sure for what. “I need...”

“Me too, baby.”

His eyes catch mine, a wicked grin on his face making his dimples pop out. Making one final sweep between my lips, he pulls back.

“Condom?” I breathe. If I don’t feel him soon, I’m going to burst.

“Pants.”

He leans off the bed and grabs his discarded jeans off the floor. After a quick search, he pulls out a square foil package. I watch as he bites into the edge and pulls it open with his teeth.

Nixon grins at me and pushes his boxers down, his hand wrapping around his rigid length and making a few painfully slow strokes.

I moan at the sight, my hand going to my breast and giving it a firm squeeze as I watch him put the condom on.

My legs fall open, inviting. Impatient, I reach for him and push his hand away to wrap my own fingers around his dick. He’s pulsing underneath my touch, and I can’t wait to feel him buried deep inside me. Giving him one long stroke, I pull him closer until he’s settled between my legs. His cock brushes against my heat, coating itself with my wetness. He slides between my lower lips, the tip of his cock brushing against my clit every time he does so.

“Stop with the games and fuck me already.”

He pulls back, his fingers digging into my hips so strongly I’m sure I’ll have bruises tomorrow.

“As you wish.”

Then he finally, *finally* drives into me, long and hard.

We both gasp as he slides inside, stretching me to the point of pain.

I dig my fingers into his shoulders, wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling him closer in the process.

“*Fuck*, you’re tight,” he hisses into my ear as he pulls back until just the very tip is brushing my entrance, and then slides back in, setting a steady rhythm.

“Maybe you’re just big.”

There is no maybe about it, he *is* big. I don’t think he’s halfway in yet, and I already feel so full that I could burst.

“Music to my ears, baby,” he chuckles, his chest rumbling under my ear. “Music to my ears.”

I slide my hands over his back, grazing the skin with my nails. “Don’t get cocky with me now, Cole, and fuck me.”

Something flashes in his eyes. A challenge?

“Like this?”

He hurries his pace, going a little deeper with each thrust.

I trace my fingers through his sweaty hair and kiss his jaw. “Yes, harder.”

I pull him down for a kiss, my tongue plunging inside his mouth in time with his thrusts. My legs are around his waist, knees digging into his sides. His rugged palms slide under my legs all the way to my ass. He hoists me higher and the new angle has him plunging even deeper than before, hitting just the right spot.

“Nix...” The rest of his name dies on my lips as sweet pleasure takes over me. My whole body tightens as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me.

Nixon slams his mouth over mine, his thrusts growing almost desperate. I try to cling to his skin, but it’s useless.

After a few more thrusts he groans my name, his whole body growing rigid as he empties inside of me, his suddenly limp body falling over mine.

Silence falls over us, the only sound our heavy breathing and occasional voices coming from the hallway.

“That was...” he pants, shaking his head.

“Yeah,” I agree.

My body is still shaking from small aftershocks of the orgasm.

Propping his head on his hand, he looks at me, one of his hands smoothing the hair out of my face. “Are you sure about that one-night clause?”

Not so much, but there is no way I’ll say that. It can’t be more. He’s a football player and I’m... well, me. I brush my finger over his lower lip. “It can only be that.”

Instead of being offended, like I thought he would, he wiggles his brows playfully. “At least the night is long.”

“What...”

Nixon thrusts his hips into mine slowly. He’s still inside me, and I swear he’s already at half-mast. Instinctively, my thighs tighten around him.

Oh.

“Another round?”

He shakes his head. “You, Miss Hernandez, are insatiable.”

“Only when it comes to you,” I say, before I can think better of it.

Nixon’s eyes grow darker at my words. “I like the sound of that.”

He pulls out of me, getting rid of the used condom and grabbing a new one. I’m not sure how many of them he has lying handy, or why he carries so many, and I’m not about to ask. However, I will enjoy the benefits.

“Now where were we?” Nixon gets back into bed in all his naked glory.

Extending my hands, I trace his firm chest, enjoying the feel of his skin under my palms. I give him a wicked smile. “I think it was my turn to play.”

I push him onto his back, climbing in his lap as I lean down to kiss him.

If I have one night, I might as well make the most of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

YASMIN

“Where are you?”

“Well, hello to you too,” I say dryly. “How are you doing, Callie? How was your day? Mine’s going well, thank you for asking.”

“Don’t sass me, Yas,” Callie moans. “I need help.”

This has me abruptly stopping in my tracks. “What happened?”

Somebody crashes into me, cussing me like somehow it’s my fault he wasn’t looking where he was walking. I just glare at the guy. He mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously close to “bitch.”

Asshole.

“Where are you?” Callie asks, drawing my attention back to our conversation.

“Is that your emergency?”

“No, smartass, my emergency has to do with...” She stops for a moment, and then says in an even quieter voice, “Lady business.”

“Lady business?” I repeat, confused. What the hell is she talking about?

“Yes, lady business... you know?”

I look around, like somehow the answer will jump at me from the closest bush. No such luck. “Ummm... I don’t think I do.”

“Tampons, Yasmin!” she whisper-yells at me, and I can’t help myself; I burst into laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“That’s your lady business?”

I can’t see her face, but from the irritated tone of her voice I can clearly imagine her scowling at me. “What do you call it?”

“Period. It’s called a period. Menstruation. Menstrual cycle, whatever.”

A few people who pass by me on their way to or from the library give me confused looks, but I ignore them.

“Well, I don’t want people to know about my...”

“Lady business?” I ask, cracking up once again. It’s too funny not to, not that Callie appreciates my humor.

“Ugh, I hate you!”

“No, you don’t. Besides, you need me. So, what’s up?”

“I’m at Hayden’s, and I completely forgot to pack some...”

“Tampons?” I supply, because seriously, what’s the big deal? It’s not like women all over the world aren’t facing the same problem as we speak and

have been for, oh, I don't know, since the beginning of the world?

"Yeah."

"Should I ask for a brand or will that be too much?"

"I hate you."

"Why don't you go and buy them yourself?"

"Um... because I'm bleeding?"

I cringe. "That bad?"

"You have no idea. Can you pick some up or what?"

"Sure thing, I can get them," I say, already on the move. Still, I can't help but ask, "Where is Hayden?"

"I'm not asking Hayden to pick up my tampons!" she yells defensively.

"Oh, so you're fine with him doing all the dirty things..."

"They're not dirty," she interrupts. "Besides, he isn't home. He and the guys went to the gym."

I feel a pang of... something. Disappointment? Relief? I'm not sure, but I don't want to question it further, so I just push it back. Instead, I concentrate on Callie and her little problem.

"They're not dirty to you. Regardless, so why can't he buy your freaking tampons?"

"Yasmin!"

"I'm just asking."

"Will you get them for me or not?"

"Of course I will. You sit tight."

She sighs loudly on the other side. "Thank you."

"You can thank me later, but just so we're clear, that's a big minus in the boyfriend department."

The space by the curb just in front of Hayden's house is empty, so I park my car. My clammy fingers tighten around the steering wheel as I look at the looming house in front of me.

He isn't here, I say to myself for the umpteenth time since I hung up with Callie. *Callie said so herself.*

I haven't seen Nixon since *that* night. The night we had wild sex all night long, that ended with me waking up at noon with a headache, a serious case

of bed hair, and an empty bed. I'm not sure at what point he snuck out, but when I opened my eyes he was gone.

If the whole room hadn't smelled of Nixon and sex, I would have thought it was all just a dream, but it hadn't been a dream, and he'd done exactly what I asked for.

Just one night.

Then why did it leave me with an uncomfortable feeling in my belly?

Get a grip, Yas.

I grab the box from the passenger seat and slide out of my car, closing and locking the door before crossing the short distance to the front porch. I'm surprised when the door doesn't burst open that instant with how impatient Callie was on the phone, but nope, it stays firmly closed.

Sighing, I press the doorbell and wait.

A full minute passes, and I'm about to pull out my phone to see where the devil she is when the door opens.

"Oh, finally. What took you..." I look up and blink, the words dying on my lips when my eyes lock with the stormy, blue-gray irises of Nixon Cole.

"You're not Callie," I state, dumbfounded.

Nixon stops mid-step, clearly surprised to see me too, but regains his wit quickly. A lazy smile slowly spreads over his mouth, making his dimples pop out. My eyes dart to the little hollow in his cheek, remembering how it felt to kiss him. "No, I don't think I am."

Licking my lower lip that suddenly feels awfully dry, I zero my gaze somewhere over his shoulder, anything not to look at his smug face. "Well, I'm looking for Callie."

Well, I'm looking for Callie? What the hell, Yasmin?

I don't think I could have sounded more awkward if I wanted to. But I was so not ready to see him.

He wasn't supposed to be here!

Judging by the faint scent of sweat still clinging to his skin, and a pair of sweats hanging loose on his hips that I'm so not staring at, he probably wasn't until recently.

That's just my luck.

The side of his mouth tips up in a smirk, the same one he had when he went down on me just before he buried his face in my pussy, licking, and sucking until all I could do was scream.

My face heats at the image. He must see it too, because his smile only

grows bigger.

“Callie, huh? Any special reason for that?”

“Except that she’s my best friend?” My fingers clench, and I remember the package that’s the sole reason for me coming here in the first place. “Well, I had a little something to deliver to her, but since you’re here, I guess you can do the honors.”

I thrust the tampon box into his hands. His long fingers clasp around it, brushing against my skin and making me shiver. I pull back, breaking the contact.

“What was so important that...” Nixon looks down, the words dying on his lips when he sees what he’s holding. He all but drops the box, but manages to catch it before it hits the ground. “Are you shitting me?”

“What? Never saw tampons before, Nixon? I have to say, I’m kind of disappointed.”

“I was just not expecting...” He lifts his head. “Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

“I made my delivery, you might be useful and get those to Cals,” I say over my shoulder. I’m already halfway down the driveway. Just a little bit more, and I’ll be safely in my car.

“You’re running away, Yasmin!”

“Am not.”

I totally am. But what am I supposed to do? He wasn’t supposed to be here. And I wasn’t ready. Wasn’t ready to see him. Wasn’t ready to remember all the things he did to me that night. Wasn’t ready to feel this way when he touched me.

“Say what you want, we both know the truth.”

“The only truth I know is that you’re delusional.” I open my car door. *Almost there.* “Oh, and if I were you, I’d hurry up on that.” I wave in the direction of the box in his hand. “I’d say things were pretty critical when Cals called.”

NIXON

“Who was that?” Zane peeks from the kitchen as soon as I close the front door, a water bottle in his hand. His eyes, bulging out of his eye sockets, fall down to the box I’m still clutching tightly in my hand. “Dude, why do you have tampons?”

I shake my head.

I’m so not ready to explain this.

Whatever *this* is.

The last person I expected at the door was Yasmin. But of course she’d appear when I least expected her. I guess I should have been used to it by now.

I had to go back home to take Mom to a few appointments, so I haven’t been around much. Not that I expected a different reaction.

Just one night.

That’s all she wanted and all I could give her, but I couldn’t deny that there was something in Yasmin that drew me in, making me want more. More than she wanted, and more than I could give her. Because fuck it, we’ve been so good together. More than good, really.

Hayden descends the stairs. “Hey, have you seen...” His eyes fall down to my hands. Or more exactly, the box in them. Has nobody in this house ever seen tampons before? “Do you have something you want to share, Nix?”

“These are for your girlfriend, asshole.”

“W-what?” he chokes out.

“Your girlfriend? The one you were just asking about?”

“Why do you have her tampons?”

“Because Yasmin just delivered them a minute ago.”

“So that was Yasmin at the door?” Zane asks, his brows shooting up.

“Don’t even start,” I warn, not wanting to get into this again with him.

He lifts his hands in surrender. “Hey, I didn’t say anything.”

“Didn’t say what?” Hayden looks between the two of us, frowning.

“Nothing.” I thrust the box into his hands, not giving them a chance to continue this discussion. “Get this to your girlfriend, will ya? I’m going to take a shower.”

A freaking cold one at that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

YASMIN

“So what do you have planned for spring break?”

“Mm-hmm...” I murmur, more interested in playing with the food on my plate than participating in this conversation.

Seriously, what’s the point in keeping up with this charade? I don’t want to be here. I know that, and he knows that. So what gives?

I honestly believed he’d give up by now, but nope, Coach is as stubborn as ever, insisting we keep our weekly dinners.

“Yasmin?”

“Huh?” My head snaps up at the change in his tone. It’s not hard per se, but there is an edge to it that isn’t there usually. Has he finally had enough of me? Will this be the day he’ll tell me to get the hell away and don’t come back? “You asked something?”

He runs his fingers through his dark hair peppered with gray, sighing in exasperation. “I was asking about your plans for spring break.”

“I’ll probably go home.” I shrug, pinching a piece of chicken on my fork. I’ve been so busy with my classes and work that I haven’t had time to even think about it, but home always sounds good. I’d get to see Mom and catch up with Grace. Maybe we can even drive down to the beach. Yeah, that sounds like a plan.

“How about you stay here?”

What is he talking about? I frown as his words settle in my mind. “Here? What would I do here?”

“I was thinking maybe we could do something. Together.”

“What?” My fingers grip the fork so tight the silverware digs into my skin.

“We could go hiking or...”

“And why would we do that?” I grit through clenched teeth. Where is this coming from? I seriously don’t understand him. Why is he pushing this so hard? He didn’t have a problem walking away the first time around. Why be stubborn now?

“I want to get to know you, Yasmin, and you aren’t making it any easier,” he says slowly, rationally, but I can see the vein throbbing on his temple. He isn’t as calm as he tries to project.

“Easier than you ditching Mom when she was pregnant with me, you

mean?” I bite out harshly.

Coach’s fork falls out of his hand with a loud *thud*. He moves back like I slapped him. In a way, I did. I’ve learned long ago that words can sometimes hurt more than actual punches.

His throat bobs as he swallows, thinking over my words. Finally, he nods his head. “Very well.”

Figures. I look away, huffing silently. *And that’s the end of it like it always is.*

I’m not sure who I’m angrier at, him or myself, but rage is swirling inside of me like a living, breathing thing just waiting to be let loose.

I force it back, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he affects me.

The rest of dinner passes slowly. Although the coach tries to keep the conversation going, it’s strained on both sides, and as soon as we deem dinner finished, I’m on my feet and getting out of the house without a backward glance.

I’m buzzing with too much pent-up energy, so instead of going back to the dorm, I turn right at the first intersection. I need to get rid of all this adrenaline, all this anger, and there is only one way I can do that.

The gym is buzzing with activity when I get inside. The smell of disinfectant and sweat permeates the air, making my nose furrow.

That’s exactly why I prefer running outside, and I can’t wait for all this snow to melt so I can finally get back to actual running, the hard pavement under my feet, the light breeze cooling my face. But for now, this will have to do.

Finding the first available treadmill, I drop my things to the ground and hop on. Tucking the buds in my ears, I crank the music up until it’s the only thing I can hear and start running, quickly going from a slow pace to a full-on run.

My footsteps are in time with the heavy beat in my eardrums as I push my body to move.

If only getting my mind to empty could be as easy. But of course, it’s anything but. I’m still mulling over my earlier conversation with the coach,

replaying every single thing that was said over and over.

How dare he? How dare he think he has any say in what I do with my life? What does he think? That I'll just change my plans, put my family second because he finally decided to give a damn about me?

Well, too little, too late, old man.

Too little too late.

Get a grip, Yas. He isn't worth it.

Clenching my hands into fists, I push myself harder. My heartbeat rises, my breathing speeds up, and sweat starts coating my skin. Closing my eyes, I try to push the memories back, but it's useless.

Nineteen years, and he just realized it now? If I didn't reach out to him, if I didn't need him, he wouldn't have this little part of me either. One fucking day in a week that I spend with him just to keep his mouth shut.

My feet pound against the treadmill, but with my wandering thoughts I lose my footing.

"Fuck," I mutter, extending my hands to grab the railing so I don't fall face first.

A hand appears in front of me, pressing the buttons on the machine. The treadmill slows until it comes to a complete stop.

Sighing in relief, I lift my head only to find Nixon standing in front of me. There is a furrow between his brows as he looks at me. His mouth moves, but between the music still playing, and the echo of my heartbeat in my ears, I don't hear a thing. Standing straight now that the belt's not moving any longer, I pull the earbuds out.

"You planning to kill yourself today?" Nixon asks dryly.

I glare at him. His whole body is rigid, his fingers twitching on the console. "I just got distracted."

"You could have gotten killed."

I pull a towel off the rack and wipe at my sweaty face. My skin feels all hot and icky from exertion. "You're exaggerating."

"Well, you could have gotten a concussion, at least."

"I'm fine," I insist, done with overbearing men for today, or maybe a lifetime. "It was just a little slip, hardly anything to worry about."

"Because I was here to stop the damn machine." His clenched fist pounds against the treadmill. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I needed a place where I can come and get rid of all this pent-up energy," I hiss quietly. "That's what I've been thinking. Not that

it's any of your business."

My breathing is hard, breaths coming out in ragged pants.

Nixon watches me for a moment in silence. That's when I notice people staring at us from all sides. We might have been keeping our voices low, but I can still feel people's curious glances on my back. Trying to hear what's going on. I hate their attention, but I try my best to ignore them.

Fuck them and their curiosity.

Can't a girl just get some peace so she can run her anger into submission? Is that really too much to ask?

"Come with me," Nixon finally says, breaking the silence.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. I came here to run, so I'm going to run."

There is no way I'll let him bully me into leaving.

"I have something better in mind than running." His head tips to the side. "Now, will you get that stick out of your ass and come with me?"

I lift my chin in the air, huffing out a breath. I'm not sure what he thinks he's doing or why he's doing this, but I don't have to jump just because he said so.

I'm about to tell him just that when a smirk appears on his lips.

"Or do I have to throw you over my shoulder?"

I narrow my eyes at him, but it only makes his smile widen. "Fine," I mutter, throwing my towel at his head.

Hopping off the treadmill, I grab my stuff and start toward the exit. I keep my chin high as we pass people, making a point not to look at anybody on our way out. I'm not sure where Nixon's going with this but it better be good, or I might just find something harder to throw at his head.

Nixon jogs after me, catching up in no time, the towel I threw at him thrown over his shoulder. He pulls open the door for me and nods at the changing rooms. "Grab your things."

I do as he says, not asking any questions. Hastily I pull on my jacket over my workout gear and throw my things into a duffle bag that I always have in my car just in case before getting out.

Nixon is already there, leaning against the door and waiting for me.

Without a word he starts walking, and I follow.

The cold air hits me in the face as soon as we get outside. I pull my zipper higher, and when I turn around, Nixon's already gone to the right.

"My car is in the other direction," I call after him.

Nixon looks at me over his shoulder contemplatively, making me wonder what he's thinking. I'm waiting for a snarky comment of sorts so I can give him a piece of my mind, but instead, he just nods. "I'll wait for you to get out so you can follow me. Sounds good?"

All the fight leaves me. "Okay."

I go to where I parked, throwing the duffle on the backseat. The car starts immediately, something that never happened before Nixon took care of it.

When I get out of my parking space, Nixon is already waiting for me. He sees me coming, so he starts driving, and I follow behind him.

It doesn't take me long to figure out where we're going. Nixon takes his BMW straight into the garage and I park my car by the curb a few houses down. When I get to his house, he's waiting for me.

"Your house? Really? When I said I needed to let go of some steam, I didn't mean it like *that*."

Nixon rolls his eyes at me. "Get your head out of the gutter, Hernandez. You only wish." He waves me toward the house. "C'mon, let's get inside."

The light is on downstairs, but the house is unusually quiet. Or maybe it's usually like that, but I'm just used to there being a lot of people mingling around. The only times I've been here was when there was a gathering of some sort, even if it's just the guys and their close group of friends.

Nixon stops only long enough to take off his jacket, and then he's going down the hallway.

He opens a door that I haven't noticed before and waits for me to come. Taking off my jacket, I hang it next to his and start toward him. He flicks on the light, so I carefully look inside, not sure what to expect.

"You leading me to your den, Cole?" I ask as I see a narrow staircase leading into a basement of some kind.

"I'll have to give the guys suggestions if they ever decide to redecorate." He turns to me, raising his brow in challenge. "You coming or what?"

"Fine." The steps creak under our footsteps as we descend into the darkness below, making me wonder if they'll fall any second now. "Seriously, if this is some kind of joke to you I'm going to..."

A switch flicks in the distance. Light illuminates the room, blinding me temporarily. Cursing silently, I blink a few times but it takes me a moment to regain my vision.

The space comes into focus slowly, and I turn in a circle to take it all in. "What is all of this?"

It's not big or fancy, if anything the decor is minimalistic. Linoleum covers the floor, the walls are bare and it's freezing inside. There is a treadmill and a stationary bike, a couple of benches and racks with different weights, and one lone punching bag hanging in the far corner of the room.

"Our private gym."

"We were already in the gym," I point out, letting my bag slide off my shoulder. I push it into the corner with my leg, moving closer to inspect the equipment.

"We were, and you almost died. Eaten by the belt."

"It was just a small slip."

Nixon is moving around the room. He's behind me, so I can't see his face or what he's doing, but I can hear him clearly.

"A small slip that could have ended terribly. Besides, we aren't here for the treadmill."

I turn around to look at him. "What are we doing here?"

He grabs something from the hook on the wall and throws it at me. I almost drop it in surprise, but manage to catch it at the last moment.

Gloves.

I lift them in the air, looking at them warily. I've never been interested in boxing or anything that required any level of violence like that. I'm a peacemaker, not a fighter. Well, verbal lashing out not included.

They're bigger and heavier than you'd imagine, their weight reminding me of the weight in my heart. Large and overwhelming. Like a wave ready to come down and crash over me.

How many punches can one take before being knocked down to the ground? Because that's how I'm feeling right now. Like I've been punched repeatedly, over and over again, and no matter how hard I try to get back to my feet, it feels pretty pointless.

A lump of nerves forms in my throat, and it takes me a few tries to swallow it.

"This." Nixon's hand falls on my shoulder, and I lift my gaze to his. "This is what we're here for."

NIXON

Yasmin observes the gloves like they're going to bite her. Different emotions cross her face, until they settle on one—resignation.

Fuck that.

Closing the distance between us, I put my hand on her shoulder. “This is what we're here for.”

Those dark eyes lift, meeting mine. There is uncertainty in there, fighting with the storm brewing inside her.

Letting my hand fall down, I take the gloves out of her hand and start untangling the laces. Tucking one under my arm, I open the other and offer it to her.

I'm not sure what happened to get her so on edge, but whatever it is, I'm not letting her give up.

I noticed her the moment she entered the gym. Her face was all hard lines, her gaze set in front of her, not once wavering. People were moving out of her way, and it's good they did because I'm not sure she'd have been able to stop. She was that lost to the demons that are haunting her.

“I didn't know you box.” She slips her hand into the glove, and I help secure it, repeating the process with her other hand.

“I don't.” Her brows furrow in confusion. “Well I did, I took Jade to some classes back when she started high school, but I couldn't risk getting hurt so I had to stop. These are Maddox's.”

“Jade boxing?” Of course that would be something to get her attention.

“Kickboxing actually, but she hasn't gone since...” I run my hand through my hair, stopping before I say the words out loud. “Well, but yeah, she used to love it.”

Understanding dawns on her face. I don't have to finish for her to know.

Before our mom was diagnosed.

Before the cancer started to steal the life out of her.

Before our family was torn apart.

Before I became a selfish bastard.

Before.

Just *before*.

Shaking my head, I push those thoughts to the back of my mind, forcing them into a box. This isn't about me and my demons. This is about Yasmin.

It's about helping her get back some control over her life and taming the storm inside her.

"Let's see what you've got."

Taking a step back, I go to the bag hanging from the wall in the corner. I stand behind it, placing my hands on either side and holding it close.

Yasmin moves forward slowly. Her lips are pressed in a tight line as she looks contemplatively at the bag.

I wait her out quietly, not wanting to force her if she's not ready. She needs to be the one to do this in her own time.

When she's within a hand's reach, I say, "You should..."

But she's already holding her hands up and close to her head in a classic fight stance. Yasmin lifts her gaze, her eyes meeting mine. The fire that was gone is blazing once again, only this time, she's the one owning it. A small, barely discernible smile tips her lips. "I think I know how to throw a punch, hotshot."

I lift my arms in surrender. "Then go at it."

And that's exactly what she does.

The first punch comes faster than I expect it, startling me. The bag sways toward me, and I grab it at the last second, holding it still as she throws a series of punches.

There is no fitness to them, just a pure, raw strength. She's not fighting her storm, she's become it. Beautiful in unleashed anger.

Her eyes are glued to the bag as she lands punch after punch. Left, right, right, left, left. Her body moves with every punch. A sheer layer of sweat coats her skin as she speeds up her movements.

One lock of hair slips from her bun and falls into her face, but it's as if she can't see it. Her breathing is ragged, the pulse in the crook of her neck beating furiously underneath her skin as she attacks without mercy, landing punch after punch dead center.

"Ugh!" Her gloved fist connects with the bag, the firm slap echoing in the room. The force of the punch is so fierce that she pushes me back, if only an inch.

Yasmin crashes against the bag, her fist pounding the hard surface, but the anger is no longer there, only sadness.

Letting go of the bag, I step around it and pull her into my arms. Yasmin goes willingly, pressing her forehead against my chest as she snuffles softly. Something wet falls on my skin. Tears or sweat? I can't say for sure, but

whatever it is, I pull her closer to me, holding her tighter.

“Are you feeling better?”

Her fingers grip the edge of my shirt. “I just feel empty.”

“Want to talk about it?”

The silence is so long that I think she won’t say anything, but once again she surprises me.

“It’s Tuesday,” she whispers, her warm breath touching my skin. She says the words like that’s supposed to mean something, I’m just not sure what.

“And?” I run my hands over her back in a soothing manner, like I did with Jade when she was little and afraid of something.

“On Tuesdays I have dinner with the coach.”

Oh, fuck.

Coach. Not dad. Not even father. Or sperm donor.

Coach.

She couldn’t have detached herself more from him even if she wanted to.

What the hell happened between the two of them to cause such a rift? I’ve known the guy for two years, and in all this time I’ve never heard him mention a family. Hell, if it weren’t for the rumors about him and Mrs. G, I’d think the dude is gay or some shit like that. But he has a *daughter*. A kid he never mentions, and I’m sure nobody knows about. So what’s with that?

“How did it go?” I ask carefully, wary of the direction this is going. So far every time we came even close to touching this subject she got closed off in a heartbeat, and I didn’t want that to happen now.

“Fucktastic, per usual.” Yasmin tries to chuckle, but it comes out more of a snuffle.

“You don’t get along.”

“We’d have to talk to get along.”

She pulls back and wipes her nose with the back of her hand. Avoiding my gaze, she goes to her bag and pulls out a towel to wipe her face.

Giving her the space she obviously needs, I go to the fridge we have hooked up down here and pull out two water bottles. I give her one after she tugs the gloves off her hands, and then I take a pull from my own.

Yasmin nibbles at the edge of the bottle, so I sit down on the floor, my back pressed to the bench behind me as I wait. I’m rewarded a few moments later when she shakes her head decisively.

“To be fair, he tries to get me to talk, but I try my best to avoid it while

we pretend to eat a happy dinner like a family.” Her tone is lifeless, devoid of any emotion, but I can see the hardness hidden in her eyes. She walks from side to side, unable to keep still as she talks. “That’s how we roll, always pretending that everything is fucking okay, when it’s anything but. However, today he crossed the line. He actually had the audacity to suggest that I should stay here for spring break so we can *bond*.” She chuckles, but there is no amusement. “Can you believe that?”

She looks away, trying to hide the tears in her eyes.

I work my jaw, only now realizing how tightly I’ve been gritting my teeth. “Why do you keep going?” I ask, hoping that my words sound calm, because I feel anything but. If Coach were here now, I’d punch him in the face for all the hurt he’s caused Yasmin, my spot on the team be damned.

“I don’t have a choice.”

Grabbing her hand in mine, I pull her to a stop. “We all have a choice. If he’s making you uneasy, you shouldn’t go to him.”

“I can’t. We have a deal, and I don’t know what he’ll do if…” Yasmin shakes her head, dismissing the idea. “I can’t.”

The hairs at the nape of my neck rise with trepidation. “What kind of a deal?”

At this point I’m not sure what to expect. The person I thought I knew for the better part of two years, the person I admire, is a farce, and I’m not sure what to believe in.

Yasmin watches me for a moment. I can see her debating on whether to tell me the truth or not.

Intertwining our fingers, I tug at her arm. She falls on the floor next to me. With my free hand, I push the strand of her hair behind her ear. “You know you can tell me anything. I’ll keep your secret.”

“Because I’m keeping yours?” Yasmin cups my face.

“No.” I trace her cheek with the tip of my thumb. Leaning down, my forehead brushes against hers. I shouldn’t do this. Hell, I shouldn’t have asked her to come in the first place. It clashes with everything we agreed on. But seeing her, it does something to me. She does something to me, something I can’t name, but don’t want to give up. Consequences be damned. “Because you know my darkness, and I want to know yours. I didn’t want to tell anybody about my mom because I don’t want them to pity me, but I don’t regret taking you home with me that day, Yasmin. Having you there with me... it made it a little bit easier. So yeah, I want you to tell me your secret,

not because I want to have something on you, but because hopefully it'll make you feel better. The decision is all yours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

YASMIN

The decision is all yours.

Nixon's words ring in my mind. I want to tell him, share this secret I've been hiding with somebody. No, not just somebody. I want to share it with *him*. The most unlikely of confidants. But there is something about Nixon that draws me to him. That has drawn me to him from the very moment we met.

My throat bobs, tongue sliding out to wet my suddenly dry lips.

"He got me into Blairwood," I confess quietly. My secret. My truth. My shame. "He got me into Blairwood and, in exchange, I have dinner with him once a week."

"What?" Nixon pulls back to look at me, completely dumbfounded. "How?"

Not something he expected to hear, huh?

Shifting in my seat, I move closer to him. I'm not sure if they don't have the heating system down here, or maybe they just don't turn it on, but whatever it is, it's freezing, especially since we stopped moving.

Nixon lifts his hand and puts it over my shoulder, pulling me into the crook of his arm. I rest my head against his shoulder, relishing in the warmth of his body.

Just this once, I say to myself, but the other part of me laughs.

That's what you already said.

"I was supposed to go to Yale. I got a scholarship, a full ride," I say, remembering the events like they happened yesterday. The joy of that moment I got home to find the envelope with my acceptance letter. The look of pride on my mom's face. "I worked my ass off for as long as I can remember. That's just the way I am, the way I was raised. Hernandez girls always work hard, it's like it's written in our DNA."

I should have known it couldn't last forever. It was just too good to be true. Too good to last.

"But then, my senior year, Mom got real sick. She got pneumonia, and it was so bad she ended up in the ER."

I could still remember those days. Our apartment was tiny, but even if it were bigger the walls were so thin, sometimes I'd swear I could hear what my neighbors five stories up were talking about. Mom was constantly

coughing, but it sounded more like she was trying to spit her lungs out. Her breathing was low and wheezy, and she could hardly get a few words out. By the time I finally got her to go to the hospital, she could barely breathe.

“Things were... bad. They wanted her to stay, but we couldn’t afford it, so she went home and tried to get better. But staying home for so long meant that she couldn’t work.” I shake my head. All my life she worked two jobs so we could have a decent living and not once did I hear her complain. If you work hard, you’ll be rewarded. She used to say it all the time. It was our mantra, and in an ideal life it would be just like that. But life is far from ideal, and it throws you a curveball when you least expect it. Sometimes if you’re lucky you get to dodge it, but more often than not, it smacks you right in the face, throwing you to the ground and ripping away everything you worked for.”

“When she got sick you found a job,” Nixon says quietly.

For a moment, lost in the memories, I forgot he was even there.

“I found a job.” I nod in affirmation. “It was after school, so I didn’t miss my classes, but the hours were long. I slept little, missed some deadlines, failed a few pop quizzes... By the end of the year, I managed to salvage enough to graduate on time, but I lost my scholarship.”

It was still hard to believe that those years of hard work could have all been for nothing. That everything was lost in a matter of months.

No, not all. I still had my mom. It took time but she got better and that’s better than any scholarship at any college I could have ever gotten.

Nixon pulls back and tips my chin to face him. His gentle eyes pierce mine, not missing a thing. “You never told her, did you?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” I smile sadly. “Mom was so happy when I got those acceptance letters. She told all her friends that her girl was accepted to one of the top colleges in the country. When you come from nothing and struggle all your life to make it work, when you come from a family where most of the people barely finished high school, you want to show the world you’re better than what they give you the right to be. I couldn’t take that joy away from her. But without a scholarship, there was no way I could actually make it work.”

“So you called the coach.”

My throat tightens, but I force the words out. “And so I called the coach, something I never thought I’d do.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” I shout, pulling back. Angry with him for asking the question, for not seeing. But even more angry at myself for still caring. I shouldn’t care. “He left me, left my mom, and he *never*, not once, looked back.”

And when people leave you, you want to show them that you *did* make it. All on your own. A lot of good that did me.

“I’m sorry, that was stupid.” Nixon grabs my arm. “So, how did you get in touch with him?”

“You’d think it would have been harder, but by then he hadn’t been a professional athlete for quite some time. I found him online, phone number and all. I called, introduced myself and asked him to meet me. Not even a week later he was in the city, sitting across from me in some shady bar in Queens. I told him what I needed, and he agreed. On the condition that I spend one night a week with him, giving him a chance to get to know me.”

A shiver runs through me. The cool air and exhaustion are getting to me, so much, not even Nixon can keep me warm.

He notices it almost instantly. Of course he does, sometimes I wonder if anything passes by that guy. He looks around, his hands absentmindedly rubbing my arms.

“C’mon,” he says, giving me a soft squeeze. “Let’s go upstairs, it’s freezing here. You’ll catch something.”

Getting to his feet, Nixon extends his hand to help me up. Intertwining our fingers, he grabs my bag with his free hand and leads me toward the stairs.

In silence, we climb back up. The house is as quiet as it was when we got here. Bypassing the living room, Nixon goes straight for the stairs, but I stop in my tracks. He looks over his shoulder at me expectedly.

“What?”

I look at the dark stairwell and then back at him. His eyes are glued to my mouth, and my throat goes dry. “I... I should probably go home.”

Nixon looks confused for a moment, but then something else passes over his face. Regret, maybe? His fingers tighten around mine in a deathly grip.

“Or you could stay,” he says slowly.

I nibble at my lip, unsure of what to do. Afraid of what this all might mean.

I’m emotionally drained, and following Nixon up to his room has “bad decision” written all over it.

I should go home. It shouldn't even be a question of whether I'll do it. I should turn around right this instant and leave.

Nixon's soft gaze is boring into me, peeling away layer after layer of my defenses and making me lower my guard.

Stay, that one word written all over his face. *Stay*.

"Nixon, we can't..." I try to resist it, resist him, although a part of me knows it's futile. A part of me isn't ready to say goodbye.

"Nobody is here." Nixon tips his head back, looking at the ceiling. "Well, Maddox probably is, but he barely comes out of his room on a good day."

"What about the others?"

I haven't even thought about it up until now, but if Callie or Hayden come and find me here, with Nixon, they won't just let it go. They'll ask questions I'm not even sure I have an answer to, not that I'd want to share even if I did. No, that's definitely out of...

"Zane has an away game, and Hayden and Callie have gone to visit his grandma."

Gone. I want to sigh in relief. *They're gone*.

This silence stretches so long it becomes uncomfortable. I close my eyes, trying to gather my thoughts. They're all over the place. Just another reason why this is such a bad idea.

"If you don't want..."

"No." The word is out before I can stop it.

My heart kicks up a notch, thumping wildly in my chest. Blinking my eyes open, I find Nixon looking at me, unsure and weary.

"I'll..." I lick my lips. "I'll stay."

The tension in the air seems to intensify with every second that ticks by. Finally he nods, and without another word he pulls me to the stairs.

The second floor is as quiet as the rest of the house. Nixon doesn't even bother turning on the lights as he leads me into his room.

"You're freezing," he says without even looking at me. But he's right. The cold has set into my muscles, making me tremble. "You should take a shower. Warm up."

"Aren't you cold too?"

Nixon stops and looks at me, his brows raised. "Are you inviting me for a shower?"

"What if I am?"

My heart is in my throat as I wait for him to say something. I'm not sure

if I want him to agree or give me a pat on the back as he sends me off. This is completely uncharted territory.

I never had time for guys in the past. They were a welcome nuisance every once in a while, but overall my sole focus was on staying on top of my game and getting into college.

Instead of having a boyfriend who would want my attention, I always looked for guys who were the same as me, too busy to have a steady girlfriend, but wanted a release every once in a while and somebody to accompany them to school events if necessary. In high school, there was this one guy that I had an on and off thing with when it suited us. We broke it off on prom night and parted amicably. Since I got to college there has been a guy or two, but nothing even close to becoming serious. They have all been... safe.

There is nothing safe about being with Nixon Cole.

He contradicts everything I believe in, stands for everything I hate, but being with him... I've never felt more alive or understood.

I extend my hand toward him. A silent offering.

He looks at it like it's the strangest thing he's ever seen. Then, slowly, oh so slowly, he puts his hand in mine and pulls me to him.

"What happened to just once?"

With my free hand, I reach for his face, my fingers gliding over his skin and memorizing every line of his face.

I trace the outline of his lower lip, a tingling sensation spreading through my arm. He sucks in a breath, his mouth parting slightly.

"You happened."

I'm not sure how else to explain it to him. I can't even explain it to myself.

But my answer seems to satisfy him because he pulls me to the door and out into the hallway. There is a closet there where he stops, taking two towels out of it, and then he leads me down the hallway to the bathroom.

The same one where I overheard his conversation with Jade.

Is it possible that it's been barely a few weeks since then? It seems like so much longer.

Flicking the switch, he pushes me inside, closing and locking the door after us.

When I turn to him, I find his heated stare on me. "You can still change your mind."

My hand sliding under the hem of his shirt and brushing against his flat abs is my only answer. I slowly pull the shirt up and over his head, enjoying his hot skin under my palms.

We undress each other slowly, discarding a piece of clothing at a time until we're both standing naked.

Nixon turns on the shower, and when the water is warm, we step inside. It's a tight fit, but neither of us complains as we're pressed close together.

I hiss softly at the first contact of the hot water on my skin. Goosebumps rise on my arms at the difference in temperature, but I welcome the burn.

Nixon picks up shampoo off the shelf and pours some on his palms. I try to reach for it, but he pulls it back. "Let me."

So I do. Turning my back to him, I let him wash my hair and my body. His hands slide over me, his touch slow and gentle as he washes every inch of me.

A soft moan rips out of my throat as his hand cups my breast, fingers brushing over my puckered nipple and down my stomach.

I cover his hand with mine as the tips of his fingers reach my mound, my whole body leaning back into his strong chest. I can feel his hard erection pressed against my lower back, hot and heavy.

"My turn," I pant, turning around.

Nixon nods his agreement and hands me shampoo. It smells like pines and just a hint of citrus. His scent. Now rubbed all over my skin. My stomach clenches as heat spreads through my core. A heat that has nothing to do with the hot water and steam filling the room, but with this guy standing in front of me.

I squeeze some body wash onto my hands and rub them together before placing them on his slick skin. My hands roam over his body, rubbing every inch of his flesh. Wide shoulders, defined pecs, narrow waist, and every ridge of his stomach.

My eyes are glued to his serious face, his light irises filled with desire. I move my hand lower. His cock is standing straight, hard, and ready. I wrap my fingers around him, giving him a few slow strokes.

A soft groan rips from his throat as I work his dick with sure movements. If it's possible he grows even harder in my palm. My tongue darts out, sliding over my lower lip.

I want him.

Bad.

My thumb slides over his head, smearing the drops of precum.

Fuck it.

I fall down on my knees. It's slippery, so I have to grip his hips to steady myself. With one hand on his hip, I grip his dick in my other one.

Nixon's eyes grow wide when he sees me. "Yasmin, you don't have..."

"I want to," I whisper, and then I take him into my mouth, sucking on him like a lollipop. His eyes grow even darker, but then they fall shut, his head tilting back as my tongue swirls over his head, pulling him deeper into my mouth.

I'm not sure I'll be able to take him all the way in, but Nixon doesn't seem to care one bit. A low growl comes from him, his fingers digging into my hair and holding me steady as I slowly work his cock.

I let my teeth slowly graze over him as I pull back, my hand steadily pumping him as my tongue slides on the underside of his dick, from the base all the way to his tip, and then I suck it back into my mouth, tasting his musky scent.

That's what finally makes him snap.

His fingers tighten around my strands, pulling my head back and making his cock pop out of my mouth.

"Out," he grits through clenched teeth. "Now. I'm not going to blow my load in that pretty mouth, no matter how tempting it sounds."

We quickly rinse and get out of the shower, leaving a wet trail behind us as we grab the towels to wipe our bodies.

I try to tuck the towel around myself but it keeps falling down. Nixon grabs it and does it for me. His fingers slip under the knot, pulling me closer.

We're both breathing hard, our heads close, mouths lingering, but not touching.

His lips brush against mine, and I can feel his breath touch my skin.

I moan in protest, my fingers slipping in his hair. "Kiss me."

I don't have to ask twice. With a loud groan he crushes his mouth against mine in a hard kiss. His tongue sliding between my lips and swirling with mine. Desperate and needy.

"Nixon," I breathe, nibbling at his lower lip. Every swipe of his mouth over mine is like a jolt of energy that goes straight to my core. I can't think clearly when his hands are on me, but that's the point.

Not to think, just be.

He pulls back, breaking the kiss. "My room. Now."

Together we rush out of the room. In his haste, Nixon loses his own towel, flashing me his bare ass. He trips as he tries to grab it before it falls to the floor, only regaining his balance at the last moment, and I can't help but laugh.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

“It’s...” I start, but I don’t get to finish because he grabs me and throws me over his shoulder. I squeal in protest. “Nixon!”

“You were saying?”

“Put me down!” I demand half-heartedly, laughing as he drags me to his room, the towel already forgotten.

“Oh, I’m planning to.”

Once we’re inside, he shuts the door behind us and drops me on the bed. The knot between my breasts comes undone, towel falling to the side, leaving me bare in front of him.

Nixon takes me in without hurry, his heated gaze running over my exposed skin. We were naked in the shower, but this... it feels different. I squirm under his watchful eyes, my body aching for him to finally touch me. Really touch me.

“Are you just going to watch, or do you plan to join me?” I ask, propping myself up on my elbows.

He grins at me. “Oh, I plan to do more than just watch, although I’d be game for that too.” His tongue darts out, swiping over his lower lip. Nixon hums quietly as if thinking. “Maybe later.”

Moving closer to the bed, he hooks his hands under my ankles and pulls me to the very edge. He drops to his knees, then lifting one of my legs he presses a kiss to the inside of my ankle.

“Nixon,” I breathe as tingles of excitement shoot to my core.

“Yeah?” He kisses and nibbles up my legs. First one, then the other, stopping just when he moves close enough so he can feel my heat.

“More,” I demand, my voice breathy.

“Of this?” His nose traces the inside of my thigh, making me quiver as his lips press to the juncture of my thighs.

“Higher.” My fingers clench in the sheets by my side, my back arching off the mattress. “Stop teasing me.”

“Or else?” he asks. He’s so close I can feel his smirk on my center.

“Or you won’t like it when it’ll be my turn to tease you.”

“Like this?”

Then he goes for the kill, his mouth falling onto my pussy, tongue swiping between my lips as he eats me like I'm a freaking dessert.

"Joder." Letting go of the sheet, I tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. "More... I need..."

Nixon's tongue slides all the way to my opening, teasing me playfully, before he finally dips inside. My walls clench, desperately needing more.

I can feel his chuckle against me, and I want to swat him on the head for teasing me like he does, but I also want him to fuck me.

His teeth graze over my clit before he sucks on it. A wave of pleasure hits me unexpectedly, making my whole body shudder in release.

Holy fuck!

My eyes fall shut, and I swear I can see stars.

"I need to be inside you," Nixon murmurs in my ear, his hot body covering mine.

He pulls the bedside drawer open, his hand disappearing inside and coming out with a foil package. He rips it open and puts it over his cock in record time.

Pulling my legs apart, he settles between my thighs. His hands slide over the sides of my body, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

"So soft."

He slides up the inside of my thigh, his fingers finding my opening and easily sliding inside, testing my wetness. "All over. And so fucking wet. Are you always so wet, Yasmin?"

He pumps his fingers slowly inside me, stretching me, his thumb spreading the wetness over my clit in slow circles. I moan as he hits just the right spot, but then his fingers pull back. "Are you?" he demands, but I already forgot what the question was. There is no way I can think coherently with his fingers inside me like that.

"Yes," I say, not really caring what the question was as long as it'll give me what I need. Him buried deep inside me.

"Stop teasing me, Nix."

He chuckles, hooking his hands under my knees. "Always so demanding."

And then he slowly pushes inside me.

I tried to convince myself that the first time was just a fluke. I'd had sex before and it was good, enjoyable even, but being with Nixon felt different, felt like something more. It was impossible, right? But no matter how hard I

tried to convince myself—unsuccessfully, I might add—it wasn't just my imagination. Being with Nixon is even better than I remember. When we're together like this, everything seems to fall into place, and there is nothing that can touch us.

I slide my hands over his back, holding onto his wide shoulders as he pulls back and thrusts back in, harder this time.

"You feel so fucking good." He nuzzles into my neck. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't know." I shake my head. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I pull him closer, deeper. "Harder, please..."

Nixon speeds up his pace, and I meet him thrust for thrust. Sweat and droplets of water from our shower earlier still cling to our skin, so it's hard to hold on. My hands slide down and he grabs them in his, our fingers interlocking above my head.

"I'm going to come," Nixon grits through clenched teeth, barely holding on for control.

"So c-close..." My eyes fall shut. *So, so fucking close.*

"Look at me," he hisses, and my eyes snap open, zeroing in on him. The hard lines of his face, sweat coating his forehead, his muscles flexing with every thrust.

"I need you to come for me," he says, thrusting harder. He's not even bothering to pull out, just going deeper and deeper.

"Nixon..." I breathe, frustrated as the tension builds inside of me, but unable to find the release.

"Yas." He buries his head in the crook of my neck, his teeth biting into the sensitive skin as he pushes inside me. He's so deep our pelvises meet, my clit rubbing against him.

"There," I say, so he does it again. Once, twice, on the third thrust he erupts inside of me, pulling me over the edge with him.

"Any plans for the weekend?" I ask a while later, my finger sliding over his smooth skin.

Somewhere in the meantime, night has fallen, but neither of us bothered to get up and close the shutters or turn on the light.

Nixon stiffens in my arms. It lasts barely a second, but I can feel him exhale slowly as if he's trying to get a grip on himself before his body relaxes once again against mine.

"I'm going home."

My heart squeezes, aching for him.

"How are they?" I ask softly, unsure if he wants to talk about it.

Seriously, is there a policy on how to ask your—friend, hookup, fuck buddy?—about his dying mother after you just had sex? If so, sign me up because I desperately need some guidance.

Nixon sighs, his arms tightening around me. I take it as a good sign, nuzzling more into his embrace. "Jade's struggling. She doesn't say it, but I can hear it in her voice."

Just like I can hear it in his. I can't even imagine how they must feel. Knowing, *living*, with a parent who is slowly dying right in front of your eyes.

I'm not sure Nixon even notices how he closes off at the mere mention of going home. It's as if subconsciously he always wonders if this will be it. The last time he'll see his mom. Will he even make it in time to say goodbye.

"And your mom?"

"She's doing her best to cover it up, pretending it's all normal, but I can hear how tired she is. Jade says she's been sleeping more, eating less. She doesn't even protest when Jade or one of the nurses helps her upstairs. The nurses have suggested we turn one of the downstairs rooms into a bedroom for when..."

He gulps, his voice drifting off.

For when she can no longer climb the stairs by herself, my mind supplies the words he can't say himself.

I tighten my grip around his middle, offering him silent support. We fall silent for a while, each one lost to our own thoughts.

"You should tell somebody."

Nixon shifts, looking down at me. "I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

"It's not the same, and you know it."

I turn to my stomach, propping my chin on my hands to look at him.

"They wouldn't understand. Hayden's mom left him when shit got tough, Zane's mom is a druggie, and Maddox... His parents are difficult in their own way."

"You don't need them to understand. You need them to listen."

“Maybe,” he says.

I can see him pulling away. I could try to pressure him, but I decide to give in, for now.

“I wish you could come.”

“Me?” My brows furrow in confusion. “What for?”

He looks away, shrugging. “I don’t remember the last time I heard them laugh. Not like the day you were there.”

His words are like a punch to my gut.

“I—” I start, but I’m at a loss for words. What do you say to something like that? I want to help, I want to ease the pain he’s feeling, but to go to his house when they’re already dealing with so much?

Nixon presses his finger against my lips. “You don’t have to say anything. I know you’re busy with your own things. It’s okay. It was just a silly idea.”

Wrapping my fingers against his wrist, I move it away so I can cup his cheek. My finger swipes over his skin, feeling the rough stubble under my touch. “I wish I could come.”

And it’s the truth. A truth that, just a few months ago, I wouldn’t have thought possible. But I want this for him, for them.

Nixon turns to the side, placing a kiss in the middle of my palm. “Me too. But we both know wishing is futile. All we have is right here, right now. And we can only do the best we can with the time we have.”

I look out the window. The night is clear, and a dozen little twinkling lights are illuminating the sky.

“Have you ever wished on a shooting star?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There is no power in wishing on shattered dreams falling off the sky.”

Silence settles over the room. It seems louder than any words. Maybe because Nixon’s still echo inside me.

Our eyes meet, gazes hold.

“So what do you want to do now?”

His fingers tangle in my hair, eyes falling to my lips. “I want to forget.”

So I let him. Leaning forward, I kiss him like the only thing we have is right now. Because deep down, I know it’s true.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NIXON

“You brought me to the beach.”

I turn to the side, catching a soft smile spreading over Mom’s lips at the sight of the ocean in the distance. She’s nestled in the passenger seat, a thick sweater and a blanket covering her. The heating is also turned to max, all the vents pointing in her direction. The car feels like a sauna, but she’s been feeling colder than usual.

Mom catches my gaze, her smile widening.

“Don’t even think about going wild and swimming,” I joke, my own mouth tipping in a grin as I return my attention to the road ahead.

It’s bittersweet, coming here. The beach has been one of our favorite places in the world. We’d come here every chance we could; it was our thing, something we did as a family.

Not that we have much of that left.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I was just thinking about how refreshing it would be to jump in for a quick swim.”

“Now, you decide to go all rebel on us?” Jade asks, scooting forward so she can stick her head between the seats.

“I’ll have you know I’ve always been a rebel.”

“Oh, yeah? What was the most rebellious thing you did?”

“Well, one time there was this boy I really liked and...”

Jade makes a face. “Forget I asked anything!”

With half an ear, I listen to them bicker for a little longer as I make the turn into the parking lot. The place is deserted, as is to be expected since March has just begun, and the snow hasn’t even started to melt properly. I drive around until I spot the perfect place to park.

Killing the engine, I turn a worried gaze to Mom. “Dress warmly, okay?”

She glares at me. “Who’s the adult in this relationship?”

“Umm... that would be me?”

“Hahaha,” she says dryly and swats me on the head. “Funny.”

I capture her cold fingers between mine, giving them a squeeze. “It’s cold outside, even more since we’re on the beach. I worry.”

Her demeanor softens, making her look more vulnerable than before. Pulling her hand out of my grasp, she pats my cheek. “I know.”

Emotions swell inside of me, making me choke. I force my throat to

relax.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

Looking up, I find Jade's worried eyes observing me in the rearview mirror. Pain and heartbreak I know all too well stare at me for a moment. I wish I could take it away, and make this better for her, but there is nothing that can be done.

The sound of the zipper snaps us out of it. Grabbing my things, I get out of the car and go around to help Mom. She mutters something under her breath the whole time, but I choose to ignore it, hooking her arm through mine for support.

"Did you bring your camera?" Mom asks, looking over her shoulder at Jade.

"It's here," she grumbles, lifting the bag in the air to show it to her. "Not sure why, since I'm not interested in photography anymore."

"You never know when inspiration might strike."

Deciding it's better that I keep my mouth shut, I lead them toward the beach. Icy air assaults us as soon as we step out in the open, and I can feel Mom shiver next to me.

Gritting my teeth so as not to say anything, I look at the horizon. Sky and ocean clash in the distance in the mix of blues and grays so tightly intertwined you can't decipher where one ends, and the other one begins. Big waves mercilessly crash against the coast.

When we get to the center of the beach, Mom pulls to a stop. Her eyes are glued to the skyline, taking everything in. She inhales sharply, her eyes falling closed as she breathes in the salty ocean air.

"It's so peaceful out here," she says quietly, not bothering to open her eyes. "That's why I love it so much."

"I think it has more to do with us being on the beach in the middle of the winter, but sure."

Mom blinks her eyes open and looks straight at me. She's quiet for a moment, simply observing me as if she's trying to figure me out. I want to squirm under her gaze. Like that time when I was six, and she caught me stealing cookies just before dinner.

"When did you become so jaded?"

When the cancer came back.

When you told me to go back to school like nothing happened.

When they told us it's too late.

When you decided to get off the therapy.

When Dad left.

All the possibilities run through my mind, but I bite the inside of my cheek to hold them back. Nothing good will come of saying those things out loud anyway, and I'm not about to make this even more difficult for her than it already is.

A knowing look passes over her face. She shakes her head, leaning it against my shoulder before turning back to look at the ocean. "Silly question."

Words to reassure her are on the tip of my tongue. I could say them, but we'd both know they'd be a lie. Just something to make her feel better about everything that's been going on.

Instead, I wrap my arm over her shoulders and lean my head on top of her beanie-clad one.

"I wish things could be different," I confess quietly.

Just the other day I told Yasmin I don't believe in wishes, but right here, right now, I don't care if it's possible or not. I'm just a little boy holding onto his sick mom and wanting her to stay.

"Me too." Mom grips my hand with hers. "Me too."

Click.

The sound of the shutter going off is so soft I can barely hear it. But then there it is again. Three soft clicks fired in quick succession.

Click-click-click.

Mom hears it too, and we both glance up to find Jade looking down at the screen of her camera, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Not interested, my ass," Mom mutters watching Jade's mouth tip in a smile. I choke on laughter, not used to hearing Mom cuss.

"What's so funny?" She turns to me, her eyes narrowed.

I lift my free hand in surrender. "Not a thing."

"Promise me you'll take care of her."

"Mom..." The word comes out choked, but this time there is nothing amusing about it.

"Promise me, Nixon." The look in her eyes is almost desperate. "Don't let her give up on her dreams just because she's hurting."

Her nails dig into my skin, but I can barely feel the pain.

"I promise."

She nods and looks toward Jade. When she lifts her gaze, her cheeks flush, the camera dropping from her hands onto her chest.

“It’s not what you think!” Jade shouts so we can hear her over the howl of the wind.

Mom rolls her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s not.”

Mom just shakes her head at her. “Do you think we can stay a little longer?”

“You’re not cold?” She slowly turns her glare on me. “Fine. We can stay.”

“Let’s walk for a little bit.”

So that’s what we do. Jade joins us, and together the three of us walk on the beach as close to the ocean as we can get without getting wet from the oncoming waves.

“Let’s take a picture,” Mom suggests after a while. “The three of us.”

“But there’s nobody to take it.”

“I’m sure we can take one of those selfies you kids love these days.”

“Fine.”

Jade pulls the strap of the camera off her neck. Pressing a few buttons, she extends her hand and wraps her arm around Mom on the other side.

“Say cheese!” she shouts and clicks the shutter.

Jade turns the camera to look at the photo. “This is so bad.”

“Gimme that.” I reach for the camera. “Your arms are too short, Smalls.”

“I’ll show you who has short arms, you...”

She tries to grab the camera out of my hand; I pull it out of her reach, but not before another photo is snapped.

“Look what you did.”

“Zip it and smile.”

I extend my arm, which is way longer than Jade’s, thank you very much, as we pull in for another photo.

One click later, I check the screen and show it to them. “See? This is how it’s done.”

Our faces smiling, cheeks flushed from the wind as we hold on to each other.

“My babies,” Mom whispers, tightening her grip around us. There is no real strength in her arms, not anymore. She kisses Jade on top of her head and then does the same to me. “You two will be okay. I know it.”

“We’ll be okay,” I lie because I don’t have the heart to tell her the truth. We’re as far from okay as we can get, and I don’t see a way out of this hole. Nothing will ever be the same, especially not... I shake my head, refusing to even voice the thoughts in my head. No, nothing will be okay, but just for today, we can all pretend otherwise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

YASMIN

What the hell are you doing, Yasmin?

It's not the first time I've asked myself this exact same question, and I feel like it won't be the last time either. But ever since I sneaked out of Nixon's room on Wednesday morning, I haven't been able to get his face out of my mind or erase the tone of his voice as we talked long into the night. I couldn't forget the sadness he's doing his best to keep safely hidden so nobody can see his suffering. But no matter how hard he tries to hide it, *I* can still see it. And I can't let go. So here I am, sitting in my piece of a shit car after driving for over an hour and getting lost twice before I finally made my way here.

To Nixon's home.

The lights are shining on the ground floor, and I can see people moving around inside the house.

Get the hell out or go away before somebody sees you, and they call the cops on you.

Sighing, I pull on my big girl panties. "It's now or never, Yas."

Pushing the door open, I grab my bag and get out. Slowly, I cross the distance and climb onto the front porch. The front door opens before I can even think to knock—or, you know, chicken out? Jade's head peeks out, her eyes going wide in surprise. "Yasmin."

"Hi." I lift my hand in a small wave. My voice comes out squeaky, making me cringe.

Jade either doesn't notice it or decides to ignore it. "Hey, what are you doing here?" She looks over her shoulder and shouts, "Nixon! Company." Then she turns back to me. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Yeah, about that..."

But before I can finish, Nixon appears behind her, throwing a dishtowel over his shoulder. "What company? What are you..." His eyes land on me, words dying on his lips.

"Hi," I repeat the whole awkward wave thing.

Seriously, what's wrong with me? Could I be any weirder? This was such a bad idea. I shouldn't be here...

"Hey," Nixon greets me as he pulls to a stop and leans against the doorjamb. He's dressed casually in a fitted white t-shirt and a pair of loose

sweats. His hair is messy like he ran his fingers through it one too many times.

We stare at each other, neither of us saying anything. The tension filling the air is so thick it's almost palpable.

Why isn't he saying anything? Did he change his mind and doesn't want me here any longer? I knew this was such a bad idea.

"Well, then." From the corner of my eye, I can see Jade observing us with curiosity. "I guess I'll leave you two to it."

"This isn't awkward at all," I laugh as I watch Jade leave, but it's strained.

Nixon shakes his head as if he's snapping out of it. "No, you caught me by surprise, that's all. I didn't think you'd come here."

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. "I can go if you'd rather..."

His hand catches mine, pulling me closer. Our chests brush together as I bump into him. I splay my hands on his firm pecs to steady myself, the heat of his skin warming me, even through the cotton barrier. Looking up, I find those light eyes watching me. They are more gray than blue now, tempestuous and haunted. Just like the sky before the storm.

His thumb brushes over the inside of my wrist, and I know that he can feel my wild heartbeat.

"Stay," he whispers.

One word.

One fucking word.

The sweetest of prayers and the damndest of curses.

Stay.

How can I say no to this man?

My tongue darts out to wet my suddenly dry lips. "Okay." I nod my head and then repeat it. "Okay, I'll stay."

With one final brush of his fingers over my skin, Nixon pulls back and moves to the side to let me enter. Our shoulders brush as I pass next to him, the familiar rush of excitement shooting through my limbs.

I toe off my shoes in the foyer and take off my jacket before walking down the hallway.

"They're in the living room," Nixon offers quietly behind me.

I nod and follow the soft hum of a television coming from a few doors down.

"Yasmin!" As soon as she hears me, Nixon's mom sits straighter in her

seat, looking over the back of the couch at me. “Jade told me you’re here.”

“Hey, Mrs. Cole. How are you doing?” I ask as I enter. My smile falters a little at the sight of her, a vice grip squeezing around my heart and throat.

I’ve heard the stories, seen an occasional photo, but I’ve never seen a terminal cancer patient in real life. Until now.

The woman I met only weeks before is nothing like the one in front of me right now. She was skinny before, but now she’s all skin and bones. Her complexion is paler than before, almost to the point of translucence, cheeks hollow and swollen at the same time. She’s dressed in a thick blue sweater and covered in a blanket, but I can see the dark veins covering her hands.

The disease is slowly but surely eating her alive, and her kids have to watch it all play out, unable to do anything.

I didn’t think my heart could hurt more for Nixon and Jade, but I was wrong.

She waves her hand dismissively. “Nonsense, I told you to call me Helen.”

“Helen,” I correct, blinking once to chase the tears away.

“Today’s a good day.”

“Really?” I move closer, taking a seat on the couch opposite of her.

If this is what her good day looks like, I’m afraid of what the bad days are like.

“Yes, Nixon took us to the beach,” Jade explains, putting another blanket over her mother’s feet and taking a seat on the floor by her side.

Helen smiles. “They loved to go when they were little, so Kevin and I took them any chance we got.”

Jade visibly flinches at the mention of what I believe must be her father but doesn’t say anything.

“I still remember that one year, just after Jade was born. We took them to the beach. Nixon was so excited that he ran away and straight for the ocean, diaper and all.”

I laugh, the image of baby Nixon causing trouble even when he could barely walk coming to my mind.

“We barely got him out.”

“Him and his soggy diaper,” Jade adds, laughing.

“What are you all laughing about?” Nixon asks, coming to the living room. He stops behind me, his hands gripping the back of the couch.

I tilt my head back to look at him. “They’re telling me some funny

stories, that's all."

"You're not embarrassing me, are you?" He narrows his eyes at his mom and sister.

"We have yet to pull out the baby pictures," Jade laughs, winking at me.

"Oh, yes please! I want to see all the baby pics."

Nixon's hands slide to my shoulders, giving me a warning squeeze, which only makes me laugh harder. "No baby pictures."

"Yeah?" I cover his hands with mine, clasping them tight. "We'll see about that. Jade, pictures. Run!" I don't expect her to listen, but she does, jumping to her feet and bolting, I don't even know where.

"Now you've done it." He tries to go after her, but I tighten my grip on his hands. "Let me go."

"No way."

Realistically, he is much stronger than me and could pull out of my grasp without much effort, but he's a good sport so he plays along.

"Yasmin," Nixon growls softly, but his eyes twinkle in amusement.

"Nixon," I say in the same tone, grazing my teeth over my lower lip.

His eyes zero in on my mouth, his throat bobbing as he swallows. "Why are you such a pain in my ass?"

"Touché. Now be a good boy, and sit your ass down."

"I hate you."

"The feeling is mutual, buddy." I let go of his hands and pat the seat next to me. "Sit."

He glares at me, but does as I said. "I'm not a dog."

"Could have fooled me."

"I'll give you..." Nixon laughs and wraps his arms around me, his fingers tangling in my hair, making a mess of it.

"Nixon," I protest weakly, chuckling.

"Not so feisty now, are you?"

I try to wrestle out of his hold, but he's too strong. "Nixon, I swear if you don't let go, I'll..."

Puffing out a strand of my hair out of my eyes, I find Helen watching us, a smile tilting her lips. The pain in her eyes is still there, but the tension that was filling the room when I got here has lessened. At least for now.

"You'll what?" he whispers in my ear, his hot breath tickling my skin.

The goosebumps rise at the back of my neck. "I'll kick you in the balls."

From the corner of my eyes, I can see him grimace, but he doesn't let go.

“Ouch, you ruthless woman.”

“I come bearing baby photos!” Jade announces as she comes back to the room, interrupting our discussion.

Nixon groans loudly. His grip loosens just a little bit, and I use this moment to elbow him in the gut. “Don’t be a party pooper.”

He finally lets go, and I go to sit next to Helen, who is holding the albums.

“Let’s see what we have here.” Helen opens the first book, her frail fingers slowly working the pages. “Oh, look, here’s the photo from the hospital.”

For all his protests, Nixon joins us too. Sitting on the armrest next to me, he leans over my shoulder to take a peek at the photo. “I can definitely see the resemblance,” I tease, looking at him over my shoulder.

“I really don’t like you right now,” he mutters, but there is a slight twitch to his lip. At the same time, his hand slides over my waist, pulling me closer. My heart skips a beat as his hard chest presses against my back. His eyes land on my lips, staying there for a long moment before he lifts them back up.

“Thank you,” he mouths so only I can hear it, a smile spreading over his lips.

All the uncertainty somehow feels worth it, if only for this moment. Because if only for a second, the darkness that has been clinging to him seems to have pulled back. But at the same time, I know I’m screwed because I might have unintentionally, in the process, started to fall for Nixon Cole.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

NIXON

I tighten my hold on Yasmin's middle, pulling her flush against my chest. I'm not sure how we got to this point. I can't pinpoint the moment where touching her became as easy as breathing, but I don't want to question it.

Yasmin is my calm.

My sanctuary.

My anchor.

When she's in my arms, all the other things fall back, and I can finally take a moment to breathe, to think. I'm not ready to lose that.

Looking down, I see the play of dark and light flash over Yasmin's features. Her eyes are zeroed in on the screen where the final minutes of *Dirty Dancing*, Mom's favorite movie, are playing out.

Mom, on the other hand, is softly snoring on the armchair next to us. She fell asleep somewhere halfway through the movie, after barely touching her dinner. It's been a long day, full of excitement, and I was surprised she made it even this far; then again, something about Yasmin seemed to bring up her spirits. She talked more and generally seemed more animated, if only a little bit.

"Thank you," I whisper, my lips brushing against her earlobe. I'm so close I can see the hairs at the nape of her neck prickle at my nearness.

Yasmin inhales sharply and slowly turns to look at me over her shoulder. The smell of cinnamon and honey surrounds me like a warm cocoon I don't want to leave.

"You already said that," she whispers back.

"It's worth repeating. You didn't have to come. When we talked..." I shake my head. "I didn't want you to feel obligated to come."

She observes me for a long moment. "I didn't come because you asked me to."

"Then, why did you?" The question is out of my mouth before I can stop it. But it's out there, and there is no pushing it back. And a part of me, an even bigger part than I'd like to admit, wants to hear her answer. I have no right to demand anything of her, but I can't help but want more than I can have.

Her.

I want her.

My calm in the middle of the storm.

The anchor that's holding me together when I think I'll go mad.

"Because I wanted to," she confesses quietly, those dark eyes falling to my lips for a split second before they meet mine. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes."

Yes, it is. After everything that has happened, everything that I accused her of, how can she forgive me so easily?

Then again, Yasmin has the biggest heart known to man, so is it really that surprising?

"Well, your mother is a hard woman not to fall for, Nixon Cole."

Just her? The question comes out of nowhere, leaving me stupefied for a moment. But looking at her eyes, I know it's true. Something about Yasmin has drawn me to her from the very moment we met, and it only intensified in the last few weeks.

"The feeling is mutual."

"You think?" She turns her head to look at Mom, a soft smile curling her lips. "She's an amazing woman. I'm sad that I didn't get to meet her before."

There is that word again. *Before*. A turning point that will mark our lives forever.

"I know it."

Yasmin must feel my restlessness because her hand covers mine, fingers intertwining tightly. She doesn't force me to talk it out; instead, we sit there in silence until the credits start to roll.

"I should get her to bed."

Yasmin moves from her position so I can get up. My whole body is stiff from sitting in the same position for hours, so I stretch my arms above my head to relax my muscles before going to Mom's side.

"Are you going to wake her?" Yasmin whispers.

I shake my head no slowly leaning down so I don't disturb Mom's sleep; I wrap my arms around her and pull her to my chest. She's lost so much weight she's as light as a feather. Her eyes blink open, the blue-gray of her irises hazy from sleep and pain meds.

"Shh..." I whisper as Yasmin rearranges the blankets that cover her body. "Off to bed you go."

Mom nods slightly, leaning her head against my shoulder, and I take her down the hallway to her new room.

It was getting harder and harder for her to climb upstairs, and no matter

how frail she became, both nurses and Jade still struggled with helping her, so we converted one of the guest rooms into her room.

There is quiet whispering behind me, and then the footsteps move closer. Yasmin slips past me and holds open the door to the room. She pulls back the covers, and I place Mom down in the middle of the bed.

The night nurse rushes after us and starts adjusting the covers and checking her breathing and pulse. We asked her to give us some space today, so we could spend it as a family without her hovering over us, a constant reminder of all the bullshit that our lives have become. All of us needed a little bit of normality, if only for one day.

The nurse, Agatha, I think, lifts her head and finds us watching. “She’s fine; you should go and get some rest,” she whispers, offering me a kind smile.

I nod, but my feet are glued to the ground. It’s only when Yasmin tugs at my hand that I finally start moving.

I let her pull me out of the room and up the stairs toward my room.

“You should take the room. I’m...”

Yasmin presses her finger against my lips, shushing me.

“You’re dead tired on your feet, Nixon. You have to sleep, and you won’t get that on the couch.”

“I can’t sleep. Every time I close my eyes...” I shake my head, not even wanting to go there. “I can’t shut my mind off long enough to fall asleep.”

“Let me help you.”

Yasmin rises on her toes, her lips pressing softly against mine. My throat bobs as I swallow. I shouldn’t let her do this. I shouldn’t use her like that, she deserves so much better.

As if she can read my mind, she repeats, “Let me.”

Taking a step back, she tugs at my hand. I don’t resist her. Not when she leads me to bed. Not when she kisses me softly. Not when she helps me take off my clothes. And certainly not when she lets me forget everything and lose myself in her body.

Loud banging wakes me up. It’s like somebody has taken a hammer and it’s banging against my brain. I jump upright, the covers falling to my lap.

Confused, I look around, noticing the details of the room surrounding me. Blue walls, king-sized bed, trophies... My room. I'm home.

"Nixon!" Jade's panicked voice breaks me out of my stupor. I jump out of the bed, looking around the room until my eyes land on the sweats I had on yesterday discarded on the floor.

"Coming!" I pick them up and start pulling them on.

"What's going on?" Yasmin's sleepy voice comes from the bed. I give her a quick look; she's sprawled on the bed, her hair a mess of curls spread over my pillow. The pillow that we shared last night.

After we...

Pushing the thought away, I concentrate on here and now. "No idea, but Jade's upset."

She lifts her head off the pillow, her face turning serious instantly.

"I have to go and see what's going on."

Not waiting for her response, I turn on the balls of my feet and slide into the hallway. I almost crash into Jade, who's waiting on the other side of the door. My hands land on her shoulders to steady her.

"What's wrong?" I ask her, my heart going into overdrive at the sight of her. She's still in her pajamas, her hair a mess, and there are tears streaming down her cheeks.

"M-Mom," she stutters.

One word. That's all it takes. Letting go of my sister, I sprint down the stairs. The pounding of my feet matches the hectic beat of my heart echoing in my eardrums. I don't slow down or stop until I'm standing in the doorway of my mother's room, where two nurses are working on her.

"She's breathing," one of them says, hooking her to machines.

Breathing?

"What the hell happened?" I demand, not knowing what to do, where to look.

"She stopped breathing for a moment there, but we have her stabilized," the nurse from last night, at least I think it's her, explains, not even bothering to look at me as she resumes her work.

Stopped breathing.

Stopped... breathing.

Stopped...

Jade sobs somewhere behind me. I turn around to find her but Yasmin's there, her arms wrapped around my sister's shaking shoulders as she tries to

soothe her. But there is no soothing this pain. The wreckage that caused these wounds is too grave, leaving scars that will never be able to heal.

I catch Yasmin's gaze and find tears pooling in her eyes. She murmurs something to Jade I can't hear, but whatever it is seems to calm her a little.

We stay on the side, letting the nurses work. They hook Mom to more machines, the insistent *beep-beep-beep* measuring her heart rate filling the room. I hate and love that sound with equal ferocity. It's a sign that she's still alive, her heart still beating, but at the same time it's counting down slowly until her heart gives up completely on us.

Finally, the nurses give us the go-ahead and leave. Not waiting a second, I move closer to the bed, sitting on the very edge and taking Mom's hand in mine. At some point, they hooked her to an IV. I trace the prominent veins on her hands before covering her cold one with mine. It swallows hers completely. The hand that once held mine as she introduced me to the world around me, the hand that soothed my pains and fears, the hand that led me to my first day of school, my first practice, gave me my first football, brushed away my tears, has now come to this.

I'm not sure how long I sit there just holding her hand.

"You should get something to eat," Yasmin says from behind me, her hands landing on my shoulders and giving them a firm squeeze.

"Not hungry."

"She wouldn't want this for you, Nixon."

"She isn't awake to say so, now is she?" I snap at her.

I expect her to back off, but she doesn't even flinch. Closing my eyes, I force myself to take a deep breath and count to ten; only when the tension in my shoulders eases a little do I look at her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not."

Yasmin doesn't deserve my anger, not when she did her best to make things easier for me. For all of us. She shouldn't let me slide just so she doesn't upset me.

"It's not," she agrees. "You can make it up to me by going to the kitchen and getting some coffee and pancakes into your grumpy ass."

"Yasmin..."

She crosses her arms over her chest and gives me a hard, you-don't-want-to-mess-with-me look. "I'll stay with her while you eat. You don't want to be

an asshole when she wakes up, now do you?”
When she puts it like that, what can I say?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

YASMIN

True to my word, I take Nixon's place, taking one of his mother's hands between mine as I watch her chest rise and fall at a slow but steady pace.

Although still pale and thin, sleeping like this she looks peaceful, almost... normal.

"I'm afraid that losing you will break him," I confess softly, the empty room my only companion. Mindlessly, I trace the lines on her hands with the tip of my finger.

I've never seen somebody care so much as Nixon does for his mother and sister. But when you lose an integral part of yourself, you learn how to love the ones that stayed fiercely. I know that better than most people. And Nixon, Nixon loves more fiercely than most.

"H-he..." I lift my head when I hear a soft wheeze. Her voice is so low I have to strain to hear her.

"Helen?"

Her eyelids flutter a few times before she finally manages to pry her eyes open. It's as if they're too heavy for her to lift them on her own.

"Are you okay? Do you need me to call somebody? A nurse? Nixon?" I ask, trying to keep my voice calm and steady. She doesn't need me to panic the fuck out, although that's exactly what I want to do.

Her fingers twitch between my palms. "F-fine."

"Should I call somebody?" I look at the door, hoping that somebody, anybody really, will come here and tell me what to do.

"Y-Yas..."

Hearing my name draws my attention back to the woman lying in bed. "T-take c-care..." A coughing fit interrupts her already stuttering words. I lean closer, soothing my hand over her back, pretending I know what the hell I'm doing when in reality I don't know shit.

"Helen, I really think we should call the nur—"

Her hand grips mine with more force than I thought she had. "N-Nixon... p-please... c-care... N-Nix..."

My heart squeezes painfully as her stuttered words finally register in my mind.

"I-I n-need..."

I return her squeeze with one of my own, sniffing so I prevent the tears

from spilling. Even on her deathbed, she still puts her children first.

The sudden urge to call my mom, see her, hear her voice, is overwhelming.

“I’ll try my best,” I say weakly, giving her the best promise I can muster.

“H-he cares...”

With my free hand I wipe at the tear that slipped down her cheek. “He does, doesn’t he? Both he and Jade do. You raised them well, you should be proud.”

“A-am.” She nods and sucks in a sharp breath.

“Want me to call them now? They were really worried for you.”

It doesn’t seem fair that I’m the only one talking to her when she’s awake when her two children are out there going mad with worry.

Helen nods her head. Patting her hand, I put it on the bed and get up. When I open the door, I see Nixon coming out of the kitchen. He lifts his head, his eyes growing wide as panic and anxiety fill them.

“She’s okay,” I reassure him quickly. “She’s awake.”

Nixon nods and rushes into the room. Knowing that he needs time, I go back to the kitchen. Jade is sitting at the table, playing with her food. She lifts her head when she hears my footsteps.

“Your mom’s awake, you should go see her.”

Jade’s eyes go wide at my words. Pushing the plate away, she gets to her feet.

I put my hand on her shoulder as she passes by. “Remember, you have to be strong for her. I know this isn’t easy, for any of you, but for her...”

Closing her eyes, she nods in agreement. “Thank you, Yasmin.”

Once she’s out of my view, I head into kitchen. My phone is still on the counter where I left it earlier. Taking it in my hands, I unlock it and go to my favorites, pressing the call button. As I wait for her to pick up, I walk to the window and look outside. The snow is slowly melting and nature is waking up.

“Yasmin?”

“Hola, Mamá,” I say quietly, as soon as I hear Mom’s voice on the other side of the line.

“Is everything okay, mí niña?”

I inhale deeply, letting my body relax as I listen to her familiar accent. “It is now.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “You don’t usually call this early.”

“I just...” Tears that I’ve been holding back finally come out. “I needed to hear your v-voice.”

She sighs, sensing that something’s wrong. She could always feel it when something was troubling me, and she’d never let it go until I spilled my guts. “Tell me what is troubling you.”

So, I swallow the lump in my throat, and then I tell her everything.

“I have to go back to campus.” I hate to be doing this, but classes and work aren’t going anywhere. I spent the whole Sunday with the Coles, staying as long as I could, but it’s time.

“I know.” Nixon’s arms tighten around me as he presses his lips against the top of my head. The gesture sends a swarm of butterflies through my stomach. “Drive safe, okay?”

I nod my agreement. Pulling back so I can look at him, I cup his cheek. “Promise me you’ll call if you need anything.”

“I’ll call.”

“Promise.”

He sighs. “I promise.”

Lifting on my tiptoes, I press my lips against his. His hands grip my hips, fingers digging into my skin to the point that it’s painful. It’s like he’s trying to hold me here for as long as possible, make this moment last forever.

Because as long as I’m in his arms, everything else disappears. I get lost in his kiss, lost in his touch, lost in him. It’s just him and me, two lost souls that want to forget everything bad that’s happening and just be.

Breaking the kiss, he pulls back forcefully. We hold our gazes for a heartbeat longer. Just one heartbeat, and then I turn away and walk out without saying goodbye, because if I do, I feel like it might be forever.

“What’s going on with you?”

I murmur my agreement, wiping a glass with the towel. It’s boring work, but it’s work. And as long as I can keep my mind on something and my hands busy, I don’t have to think, don’t have to wonder.

“Earth to Yasmin!”

My head snaps up at her sharp tone. “What?”

Callie shakes her head at me, a small, teasing smile tilting her lips, but it does nothing to hide the worry in her eyes. “Oh, look, she’s here. What’s going on with you? You’ve been acting off all week.”

“Just a lot on my mind.”

“That why you’ve been drying the same glass for the past five minutes?”

Looking down at my hand, I see that she’s right. I’ve been wiping the same glass while the dishwasher is still full to the brim. Placing the dry glass on the shelf, I take another one. “It’s been a long week, that’s all.”

Get a grip, girl.

If it were only that easy. Ever since I came back to Blairwood, I’ve had a hard time focusing on anything. Studying, classes, work, and hell, even volunteering, nothing seems to keep my attention. Before long, my mind would start to wander, and I’d be back at the beginning, lost in thoughts about the guy I had no right to be thinking of. Or do I?

It’ll be just this one time.

Until it was another.

And another.

So many I’ve lost count.

But what does that make us?

God, just listen to me. Not even a few weeks, and I’ve already become one of *those* girls. The ones who obsess over the guy, overthinking their every encounter to the point of giving themselves a headache.

“Mm-hmm...” Callie hums loudly, drawing my attention.

I give her a side glance and find her observing me carefully. “What?”

“Where were you last weekend?”

I force myself to continue doing my work, while everything in me stops. Did she somehow find out? What exactly does she think she knows? She can’t know that much. Not with me spending most of the time at Nixon’s family’s house.

“Just the usual. Why do you ask?” I ask carefully.

“Don’t play coy with me, chica. I’ve been to the dorm, and you weren’t there.”

Putting the final cup on the shelf, I close the dishwasher. “Maybe we just missed each other?”

“For five hours straight?”

I shrug. "Stranger things have happened."

"Yeah, like the fact that you've been sneaking around, and nobody knows where you are."

"Do I need to give you my schedule, Mom?"

She narrows her eyes at me, but continues like I haven't said anything. "And you know who's also done a whole lot of missing?" She doesn't wait for me to answer. "Well, let me tell you. Nixon, that's who."

"Really?" I look down, trying to seem inconspicuous. I know I shouldn't ask, not when she's already being nosy as fuck, but I can't help myself. I haven't seen him or talked to him since I left his house, and I was starting to get worried. I tried to tell myself that no news is good news, and that he was just busy trying to juggle his family and school, but my heart didn't care. I want to hear his voice. I want to know how they're all doing, that they're okay. All of them. "Was he around this week?"

She points her finger at me. "Something is going on, and I'll figure it out."

"What happened to letting people come to you once they're ready?" I ask, putting the glass I've been drying on the counter with more force than necessary.

Callie huffs, completely unfazed by my little outburst. "That was before you idiots decided to take your sweet time before fessing up."

"Look who's talking!"

Just then, the bell over the door chimes, and customers stroll in, saving Callie from the rest of my tirade. For now, at least.

I take the group's order and get on fixing their coffees. I've been working here since I came to college, and it's become second nature to me, to the point that if you'd wake me from my sleep, and ask me to make you something, I'd be able to do it half snoozing.

I ring their order in, and off they go. I turn back to my friend sitting at the bar.

"Is there something going on between you and Nixon?"

"What? No."

She narrows her eyes suspiciously. "That came out too fast."

"What makes you think..."

"Do you want to dissect that night at the club? Or even better, when you oh-so-casually strolled to the dining hall together?"

"You were drunk the first time, and the second was a pure coincidence."

“So you keep saying, but there have been way too many coincidences lately, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re being paranoid. That’s what I think.”

“And I think you’re hiding something.”

She’s not wrong. I’m hiding a whole lot of things, not limited to what she thinks she knows I’m hiding. God, this is getting more complicated by the second.

“I’m not sure why you just don’t say it. I think it’s a good thing.”

“What is a good thing?”

“You and Nixon.”

“Callie,” I groan. Inclining my head, I pinch the bridge of my nose. *Díos, please, grant me patience.*

“Oh, shush. You know I’m right. That guy’s had it bad for you since the very beginning.”

“So bad he wanted to rip my head off?”

“What can I say, you bring out the best in people.”

I press my lips in a tight line. “Thanks, I love you too,” I say dully.

“Joking aside, I think you’d be good for him. Tame his bad boy ways. Not that he’s been much of a bad boy lately. He’d have to be here to do that.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that Nixon has more serious things on his mind right now than chasing puck bunnies or groupies or whatever they’re called.

Sighing, I look at her. “Was there a point in you coming here? Or did you just come to annoy me?”

“Well, there actually is a point.” She takes a breath as if calming herself. “Hayden and I will be going to California for spring break. I’m going back home.”

All the irritation disappears in a blink of an eye. “Are you sure?” I lean over the counter, my hand closing over hers. “Do you feel ready to go back? Maybe it’s too soon...”

Callie has been working hard in the past few months on her therapy and dealing with the things that happened in her past. She confessed that she hasn’t gone to her family home ever since the accident and for her to even contemplate that has to be hard.

“I’m... getting there.” She takes a sip of her coffee, giving herself time to choose her words carefully. “At first, I was scared. I wasn’t sure this was the right time. If there was ever going to be a right time, but knowing Hayden is

going with me makes things easier.”

“You’ve come a long way from that angry, closed-off girl I met back in August.”

A soft smile spreads over her lips. “Being with Hayden helps.”

I shake my head. “It’s not just Hayden, although he’s good for you, but it’s you. You’ve changed somewhat for the better. You know, when you’re not being all nosy.”

Callie laughs and shoves me away. “Oh, shut up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

YASMIN

A soft knock on the door startles me. I look at the clock on my phone, which says it's well past one o'clock in the morning, and then back over my shoulder.

Callie is sleeping at Hayden's once again. Shocker, I think, *not*.

Another soft knock raps against the door, the sound echoing ominously in the quiet room.

Who could it be?

There is no reason for the dorm manager to be stopping by, she only shows up when there is a noise complaint or something like that.

Chloe? Knowing her she probably wouldn't even bother knocking.

It's probably just some drunken idiot.

Slowly, I get up and go to the door, looking around the room for anything I can use to defend myself.

Technically, nobody but the residents should be able to enter the dorm, but we all know things don't work like that in real life, and I need to be prepared for anything. I don't usually have visitors so late at night. Spotting one of my larger books sitting on the nightstand, I pick it up and leisurely hold it in my arms before pulling the door open.

"Nixon," I whisper, surprised to see him. "What are you doing here?"

He looks like a complete mess. His clothes are wrinkled, hair disheveled. There are dark circles underneath his eyes like he hasn't slept for days.

"I—" He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing with the motion. "I need you, Yasmin."

NIXON

The book she's been holding falls down on the floor as she wraps her arms around me and pulls me into her room.

The space is dim, the only light still on is the one on her desk, where different books are open, and the laptop screen is shining brightly.

Closing my eyes, I return her embrace, holding on for dear life, because that's how this feels. Like I'm drowning, and Yasmin is the only thing that's keeping me together.

My lifeline.

I bury my head in the crook of her neck, inhaling her sweet scent into my lungs and letting it fill me with warmth.

With strength.

With life.

Then the guilt comes. It slams into me like a train wreck, almost bringing me to my knees. Guilt that I'm here, that I get to escape while my sister still has to stay at our family home. Guilt that having Yasmin in my arms brings me peace, patching up the holes that have appeared in my chest since the day I let her go back to campus. Guilt that I'm living while my mother is dying.

Unshed tears of anger, frustration, and *pain* burn my eyes, but I squeeze them shut, refusing to let them fall, refusing to break, as I tighten my hold on Yasmin.

"Shh..." Yasmin whispers soothingly, her hands stroking my back. "I'm here."

She says it over and over again, swaying us slowly from side to side in a slow dance. She doesn't try to appease me with false promises and lies. She's just... here. Holding me together, while all I want to do is fall apart.

I'm not sure how long we cling to each other. It could be minutes, it could be hours.

But after a while, I finally pull back just enough so I can see her face. I cup her cheek, tucking her wild hair behind her ear.

"I need you," I repeat softly, needing her to understand.

Just... needing her.

Those dark eyes look at me with the understanding only two people who know the loss can comprehend. "You have me. I'm here. Whatever you need, I'm here."

I stare at her, letting myself get lost in her bottomless gaze.

“Make me forget.”

I don't care if it's just for a little while; even if it's just seconds without this constant ache, I'll take it. I'll take whatever she wants to give me, for as long as she does. Because somehow Yasmin Hernandez has gotten under my skin. She's become the equivalent of all the good things in my life, and I'll keep taking until she has nothing left to give, like the selfish, greedy bastard I am. Because one day, she'll figure it out, and she'll go away, and I'll be left in the constant darkness, lost without my light.

Her hand slides to the back of my neck, pulling me down for a soft kiss. Her lips nip at mine without hurry, savoring every single second that our mouths are pressed together.

Placing her free hand against my chest, she nudges me backward until the back of my knees touches the edge of her bed.

Giving one final nip, she breaks the kiss. I groan in protest, which has her lips tip up in a half-smile as she sneaks her hand under the hem of my shirt, helping me pull it up and over my head.

We don't say a word as she undresses me. I toe off my shoes as her steady hands work on getting me out of my jeans. Once she's done, I step out of them and kick them to the side, getting rid of my socks in the process.

Yasmin pulls her own shirt over her head, her perky tits bouncing since she's not wearing a bra. Her nipples are already puckered, and I can't help but cup the swell of her tits, brushing my thumb over the sensitive flesh.

A moan rips from deep in her throat. Her head falls back, exposing the line of her neck. Leaning down, I lick the revealed skin, my lips pressing against her racing pulse.

“Nixon,” she pants, her hand brushing against the swell of my hard dick, making me throb at the need to feel her.

All of her.

Completely.

Unabashedly.

Mine.

Yasmin pushes against my chest, making me fall back on the bed. I bounce off the mattress and watch her pull down her shorts and panties in one go, leaving her completely bare.

I feast my eyes on her.

God, she's beautiful.

So utterly beautiful.

The light of the lamp plays on her naturally tanned skin, giving it a golden, sun-kissed hue. Yasmin pulls off her hairband, shaking her hair loose. Transfixed, I watch it fall down her back in a cascade of dark curls. They call to me, making my fingers itch to thread through them and feel their softness.

A smile curves Yasmin's lips as she slowly moves closer.

She's all lean muscles and long, runner's legs. Her tits bounce softly with every step she takes. The generous swell that is more than a handful narrows to a slender waist, and the curves of her hips that just call for my hands to grip them.

She calls to me.

Every single inch of her was made for me. My hands, my mouth, my dick.

Yasmin climbs on the bed, her knees falling on both sides of my hips, her pussy hovering just over my cock. So close that I can feel her heat, but not close enough to touch. Her fingers trace my abs and chest, exploring the ridges and hollows of my body, making this need inside me grow stronger. I tangle my fingers in her hair, feeling its softness. I pull it back so I can see her face. There is lust in her gaze as she worships my body. And then her tongue joins in, licking and sucking as she moves upwards. Her tongue flicks over my nipple, nails grazing my skin.

Yasmin lifts her gaze, her dark, passion-filled eyes finding mine. I pull her closer, our mouths meeting in an open-mouthed kiss. Her lips part, and my tongue slides inside. Tasting, sucking, swirling.

With her free hand she fists my dick, working its length in painfully slow strokes.

"I need you," I rasp, my fingers tightening in her strands. If I don't have her soon, I feel like I'm going to burst. But Yasmin has other ideas.

"Shhh..." The tip of her finger presses against my mouth, effectively shushing me.

I suck it into my mouth, and my eyes go wide at the musky scent of her coating my tongue. Yasmin just smiles, a wicked glint in her eyes. She knows damn well what she's doing to me.

Letting her finger pop out of my mouth, I slide my tongue over my lower lip. "No more games," I grunt. Putting my hands on her hips, I pull her over me. Our bodies are pressed together like two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly.

I crush my mouth over hers without mercy, letting her taste her lingering

sweetness on my tongue.

She moans her approval, hips grinding over mine, her pussy sliding over my erection until I'm completely coated in her juices.

"Condom," I bite, barely holding it together.

I can't wait, not one second longer. If I do, I'm going to spill my load all over her like a fourteen-year-old boy who got his hands on his first *Playboy* magazine.

Yasmin grazes her teeth over her swollen lip, her eyes fixed on mine.

"I'm on the pill." I halt at her soft confession, not believing I heard her correctly. Then she quickly adds, "And I'm clean."

I inhale sharply, but there isn't enough air to fill my lungs.

I haven't ever gone without a condom, didn't even think about it. It was instilled in me early on that it was just one of the things you never do. Not if you aren't ready to be responsible for possible consequences. But with Yasmin...

"Are you sure?" She nods once before I can even finish my question. I push a runaway lock behind her ear. "I'm clean too. There hasn't been anyone. Not since..."

Not since her.

Her lip pops out, and I lean in to kiss her, licking over it to ease the sting away. Our mouths connect in a hard kiss. Yasmin's fingers dig into my hair, threading through the strands and tugging my head back.

"I'm sure," she breathes against my mouth. Yasmin leans forward, pressing her mouth against my neck, just under my ear. "Make love to me, Nixon."

I pull her away so I can see her. There is nothing but certainty in her eyes, so I kiss her, slowly, like we have all the time in the world.

My hands slide down her sides, fingers gripping her hips. Our eyes lock as I pull her down on me. She opens up, her wet heat slowly pulling me in, inch by inch until I'm filling her to the brim.

Christ. My eyes fall shut at the feel of her bare pussy wrapped around me. Hot and tight. Feeling her like this is better than anything I could have ever thought to imagine.

Her pussy quivers around me, and it takes all my strength not to pound into her until there is nothing left inside me.

"You're so wet for me," I growl in her ear. "So tight. So perfect. So mine."

“Yours.” Yasmin kisses me, her hands cupping my head and holding fiercely as her tongue slides in my mouth. “Only yours.”

“Move for me, baby,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth.

Yasmin doesn’t need more encouragement. She lifts up until we’re barely touching and then slowly lowers down. We both groan in unison as I fill her to the hilt, slowly stretching her until I’m the only thing she can feel. My hands dig into her hips helping her keep the pace.

“You make me crazy,” she pants, pressing her forehead into mine. “Every time I see you...” Slide up. “I want to feel you.” Down. “And when I feel you.” Up. “I want you inside me.”

“You have me.”

“But it’s not enough. It’s never enough.”

No, it’s never enough. And I feel like it’ll never be enough.

Not enough kisses. Not enough touches. Not enough moments to spend with this girl who owns me. Every single piece of me.

“Never,” I agree. “Give me more, Yas. Give me your all.”

Yasmin nods her agreement, speeding up her tempo. I can feel her starting to clench around me, so I help her, lifting my hips as she lowers hers.

She moans as I hit the spot inside of her, her nails digging into my skin. “More.”

Cupping her tits, I push them up, my mouth sucking on her nipples as I continue plunging into her from below. Without anything between us, every touch, every push seems to intensify. The pressure starts building at the back of my spine.

“So close,” she whispers, pressing her forehead into the crook of my neck. Her movements are jerky, and I can feel her walls start to quake around me.

“Me too, baby. Me too.”

Digging into her hips, I push upward, meeting her thrust for thrust. When her climax overtakes her, her walls squeeze so tightly around me I can only see stars. *Fuck it.* Rolling us so she’s on her back, I lift her hands over her head, interlocking our fingers. I plunge into her harder, faster, deeper. Marking her in the most primal way imaginable. Just like she marked my soul.

Yasmin calls out my name as another orgasm hits her, this time pulling me over the edge with her, completely lost in sweet oblivion.

“What happened?” Yasmin asks softly, threading her fingers through my rumpled hair. We have yet to get out of bed, not that it’s high on my list of priorities because the moment we do, the reality I’ve been fighting will catch up to us.

Being here, just lying with Yasmin in my arms with nothing between us, it’s like we’re in our own little world, and nothing can touch us.

Or maybe I was just fooling myself all along.

My whole body goes stiff at her words, but she doesn’t pull back. Her fingers continue drawing patterns all over my chest. “Since I haven’t heard from you I figured you were still home.”

“I was, but I had to show my face. I don’t want people to start asking questions.”

Yasmin hums her agreement quietly. The silence stretches between us. She doesn’t probe with her questions, not that I thought she would. Instead she waits me out, giving me time to figure my shit out. Her fingers slowly trace patterns on my skin.

“She’s dying,” I admit softly. The words are like a knife to my heart. And every time I say them out loud, it’s like I’m opening the wound all over again. “She’s been rapidly declining ever since the day you left, and it’s just a matter of time now. Probably days.”

My eyes fall shut. I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but it’s no use.

“I can’t watch her die.” The words come out husky, barely audible, but by the way Yasmin’s hands tighten around me, I know she heard it. “I have to go back tonight, but I can’t force myself to sit in that car and drive back home just to watch her die.”

It’s the first time I dared to say it out loud. My confession. My shame. But what is a little bit more on the big pile I’ve been harboring these last few months?

Her finger stops for a second before resuming the pattern. “I’m so sorry, Nix.”

“How can you feel sorry for me?” I look down at her. She can’t be serious, can she? “I’m the coward who’d rather leave his family to deal on their own than go back and face the reality.” I shake my head, disgust filling me. “Here I am, judging my father, when I’m just like him.”

“You listen to me, Nixon Cole.” Yasmin gets up, her hand cupping my

chin and turning me around to face her. “You’re nothing like your father. *Nothing*. You hear me? He decided to leave and let you deal with all that’s happening all on your own. Yes, technically both Jade and you are adults, but he’s your *father*, her *husband*, he should be the one here helping you all get through this. It’s normal that you’re scared, it’s normal to want to run away from what’s happening, because it’s awful. Nobody should have to go through what you guys are going through, but that doesn’t make you the same as your father. You know why?”

“Why?”

She lifts her chin a notch. Tears shine in her eyes, but she doesn’t let them fall. “Because despite your fears, despite your need to run away, you will go back home and stand by your family like the loving, honorable man I know you are.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.”

Her fingers skim over my cheek, a soft smile curling her lips. “Well, then it’s a good thing I believe in you enough for both of us.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

YASMIN

“Just ten more days. It’ll pass in a jiff, right?” Heidi turns to me for confirmation. “Please say I’m right. I’m so ready for a little break.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her exaggeratedly sad face. “Where are you going for spring break?”

“A group of us is flying to Florida. We’re renting a house for the week. Booze, beach, ocean, and cute, shirtless guys. What else can a girl want?”

“What indeed.”

I have to admit that the idea does sound fun. Maybe next year. When Callie is done dealing with her past and when Nixon... I shake my head, my good mood faltering. I don’t want to think about the time Helen won’t be here. I know it’s inevitable, but it just doesn’t sit right with me.

True to my prediction, Nixon left shortly after our conversation. As I was drifting to sleep, he got out of bed and kissed me softly before getting his things and heading back home to be with his family. He can think the worst of himself all he wants, but I know the truth. Nixon would do anything to protect the ones he loves.

“What about you?” Heidi asks, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?” *Spring break, right.* “Oh, I’m driving to visit my mom in the city.”

Before I can even finish the sentence, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. Pulling it out, I see a message from Jade. I gave her my number last time I was at their house, just in case she needed something. I could see how hard she was struggling with everything that’s been going on, and Nixon already has his hands full trying to keep his head above water while at the same time keeping his family together.

Wariness creeps in as I unlock the device. My heartbeat is in overdrive, the sound of it echoing in my eardrums.

Jade: Nix said not to text, but...

Jade: Can you come? He’ll need you.

I stop in my tracks, my eyes glued to the screen, rereading the message again and again.

She’s dying.

I can’t watch her die.

My eyes fall shut, pain for the two of them spreading through me.

He'll need you.

But what she doesn't say is that they'll both need me.

"Yasmin?" Heidi's voice is a little sharper, so I can only imagine how many times she called out to me.

I look up at my friend's worried face. "I have to go."

"Go?" Her frown deepens in confusion. "Go where? Class is starting in a few minutes."

I look at the stairs.

I should go up there, attend this class, then go, and squeeze in a quick study session before going to my shift at Cup It Up. The old Yasmin would do that.

He needs you.

They need you.

"Take notes for me, will ya?"

And with that I turn around and rush down the stairs.

NIXON

Soft voices coming from the hallway startle me from my wandering thoughts. I rub my face with my free hand. The exhaustion has finally set in, but I'm not ready to give in to it. Not now, with the clock ticking down. Not yet.

Letting go of Mom's cool hand, I stand up and go see what's going on. It's probably Jade talking to one of the nurses, but I could stand to stretch my muscles.

Walking out into the hallway, I stop in my tracks when I see Yasmin standing there, her arms wrapped around Jade. Yasmin's lips move as she whispers something into Jade's ear, both their eyes red from crying.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, holding onto the doorjamb.

Yasmin lifts her head when she hears me, her eyes softening just a fraction.

She knows.

Dammit, Jade. I didn't want her here. Didn't want her to see me like this. But at the same time, I can't deny that I need her here. I want to go to her, wrap her in my arms and lose myself in her sweet scent. I want to feel anything other than this suffocating despair, and she's the only one who can give me that.

I love her, and I hate her for it.

I love her.

Before I can wrap my head around it, Yasmin gives one final squeeze to Jade and lets go. We stand in silence, just looking at each other. From the corner of my eye I see Jade enter Mom's room and close the door behind her, giving us a little privacy.

"Shouldn't you be in class or something?" I ask, finally breaking the silence. I'm not sure if I want to be angry or relieved that she's here. What I do know is that I'm tired.

I'm tired of waiting. Tired of the smell of death clinging to all of us. Tired of watching Jade hide her tears in front of Mom. Tired of having to watch Mom struggle for her every breath. Tired of waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Yasmin shakes her head. Closing the distance between us, she wraps her arms around my neck and presses her lips to my pulse point. "There is nowhere else I want to be."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

NIXON

“Are you sure you don’t want to go and spend spring break with your mom instead?” I ask Yasmin a few days later as we clean the dishes after dinner.

We barely leave the house these days, instead opting to spend every single awake moment with Mom, huddled in her room. Still, I was pretty sure that it’s time for spring break.

Today Mom’s been mostly sleeping, but she did wake up for a little bit. A smile crossed her face when she saw Yasmin sitting next to me. Jade brought UNO cards so we played a little, talking about stupid nonsense just to make Mom happy. After Mom fell back asleep, Yasmin excused herself to go and prepare lunch. Since both Jade and I are terrible in the kitchen, Yasmin has taken it upon herself to make something to eat every day, forcing us to sit at the table, threatening bodily harm if we didn’t listen.

“I texted her, and she’s fine with me not coming. We’ll have more opportunities.”

But what if you won’t?

I thought I’d have more time with my mom too, and look at us now. I’ve barely grown up, and she’s dying. I thought we’d have years. Years of family moments, birthdays, barbecues, and beaches. I thought she’d see me graduate from college and maybe even enter the draft. That she’d be at my wedding one day and see her first grandchild born. But all of those moments are slipping away right through our fingers.

I know I’m reflecting my situation on her, and she doesn’t need that shit in her life. Just because my mom is dying doesn’t mean everybody’s in the same boat.

But aren’t we all in it? From the day we’re born we start dying. There are no certainties on how much time any one of us has on this planet, so shouldn’t we make the most of it?

Yasmin’s hand covers mine on the counter. Slowly, I lift my eyes to meet hers. “I want to be here, Nixon. But if that’s not what you want...”

With my free hand, I push a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I want you here.”

It’s the goddamn truth. While I wouldn’t have asked her to come, now that she’s here, I don’t want her to leave.

“Then I’ll stay. For as long as you want me, I’ll stay.”

We finish cleaning up, and once we're done, we go back to Mom's room. I take the armchair that's placed next to the bed, Yasmin sitting on my lap.

We turn on the TV, the soft glow from the screen the only light illuminating the room.

We don't say anything, just sit there with one of my hands holding Mom's, the other curled around Yasmin's middle. She's leaning her head against my shoulder, her arms wrapped around me tightly while Jade lies next to Mom on the bed.

For the next couple of days, we do the same on repeat. We get up, Yasmin forces us to eat something, and then we're back in the room. Every time Mom wakes up, we talk with her, sharing memories and funny stories from our childhood; we play cards, ribbing whoever's the current loser, which somehow turns out to be me in most of the cases. Sometimes Jade reads out loud from Mom's favorite book, *Little Women*, or we watch *Dirty Dancing* on repeat. But the moment she falls back to sleep, the quiet zeroes in on us. The uncertainty of what the next day, the next hour, will bring, and the darkness swallowing us whole until the only thing left is an emptiness that knows no bounds.

The room is clouded in darkness when I startle awake from one of my dreams, one of my *nightmares*. Blinking a few times, I look around. I'm not sure when I fell asleep or how long I was out, but something must have woken me.

My back aches as I try to sit straight, the familiar weight of Yasmin's sleeping body pressing into me.

"Nix—" I turn to the bed where I hear a low wheezing sound. Her fingers twitch in my hand, the hand that's still holding onto hers.

"Mom?" I ask, my voice rough from sleep. "Is everything okay?"

Tightening my hold on Yasmin, I lean forward so I can see Mom better. Her eyes are barely open; the bright blue of her irises has lost all the spark that was always in them, leaving them dull and lifeless. She is going away, and there is nothing I can do to change it.

"M-myy... b-boy..."

Her words pierce me straight to the heart, or what was left of it anyway.

She fights for her every breath, but it feels like I'm the one who can't breathe. The weight I've been carrying for months now is finally crashing down on me.

This can't be it. I'm not ready.

Panic spreads through me, but I try my best to appear calm. She needs me to be calm, although I'd do anything to fall down on the floor and throw a temper tantrum, demanding somebody, anybody, to do *something*.

"Shhh... You have to rest." But before my words can come out, she's already shaking her head.

The movement, no matter how small, must have awoken Jade. Her eyes fly open, worry etched in them as she leans against her hand and looks down at Mom lying next to her.

"J-Jadie..."

Tears well in my sister's eyes instantly. She *knows*, just like I do.

Jade shakes her head, refusing to listen. Wrapping her arms carefully around Mom, she burrows her head in the crook of her neck, her whole body shaking with silent sobs.

Letting go of her hand, I get to my feet. The motion startles Yasmin. Blinking her eyes open, she looks around the room. "What?"

I just shake my head, not knowing what to say. I put Yasmin back in the chair and kneel down by the bed, taking Mom's hand between mine.

"There is still time," I protest, knowing damn well there isn't. We've been playing a losing game from the very start. "You should rest."

Don't leave us. I want to beg her. Not yet.

"M—" Mom tries to suck in some air, but her lungs aren't having it. She starts coughing, and my heart hurts as I watch her struggle, knowing there isn't anything I can do to help her. Jade's sobs become stronger, but to me they feel like an echo in the distance. I want to help her, console her somehow, but I can't move my eyes from Mom's shaking body trying to get enough air into her lungs. Tears burn in my eyes.

I can't do this. I can't watch...

Hands grip my shoulders, fingers digging into my flesh. Even in the stale room that smells of disinfectant and death, I can feel the faint scent of cinnamon.

Yasmin.

She's here, holding onto me. Silently telling me she's here and offering me her support. Her presence grounds me, reminding me of what's on the

line here.

You can do this. For them.

Finally, after what seems like a lifetime, Mom's coughing stops. Her chest is still rising and falling rapidly, but at least she has enough air to breathe.

Mom looks over my shoulder. "T-take..." Wheeze. "C-care..."

Her fingers twitch between my palms so I let go of her. She tries to lift her hand, but she doesn't raise it an inch before it falls back on the mattress. There is no strength left in her body.

Tenderly, I help her lift the hand so she can cup my face. Her finger traces over my cheek. Rough stubble has turned into a full-on beard since I haven't seen the razor in weeks, but she doesn't seem to notice, or maybe she just doesn't mind.

"L-lo... L-love..." she stutters, struggling to get the words out.

"I love you too, Mom."

A tear slips down my cheek, but she swipes it with her thumb, wiping it from existence before it can fall down.

"I-I... k-know..."

She turns her head to Jade, who's still holding her tightly, like if she grips her hard enough she can make her stay. They exchange silent words of their own, and only then does she relax, her eyelids falling shut.

Mom tries to fight the sleep, but it's no use; this took more strength than she had.

"Rest," I whisper, slowly putting her hand back on the mattress. It lost its warmth long ago, but there's no way I'd let go of her. "We're here, you just rest."

There is rustling behind me as Yasmin sits on the floor behind me. Her arms wrap around my middle from behind as she leans her cheek against my back.

That's how we stay.

Me holding one of Mom's hands, while Jade has the other. Yasmin a silent support holding me together.

We don't move when the light of the day starts creeping between the blinds. Nor when the nurse comes silently inside to check on Mom. We don't move as the sun lifts high in the sky and then slowly starts descending toward the horizon, or when Mom's breathing becomes so low, it's barely audible.

Until her chest stops moving.

Until the loud *beeeep* spreads through the room, signaling that her heart has stopped beating.

Until Jade's sobs become so loud, they echo in my mind.

And the whole world stops.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

YASMIN

I leave the room, slowly pulling the door shut behind me. Jade and Nixon need to say goodbye to their mom in peace, and they won't be able to do that with me inside.

Only once I'm in the hallway do I let my own tears fall. I lean against the wall, my body sliding to the floor as I cry for the woman I'd just started to get to know, but who means the world to two people that I've started to care about. Started to love.

A humorless chuckle escapes me. Who am I trying to kid? I've already fallen in love with Nixon Cole.

Deeply. Irrevocably. Head over heels in love.

And there is nothing I can do to ease the pain he's feeling. Their world will never be the same again without their mom in it.

Wiping the tears off my face, I slowly push up and go to the living room where I left my things. I find my phone in my backpack, lying forgotten. I don't think I've picked it up since I came here. How long has it been? The days have all blended together into one. Time seems to have stopped within the walls of the house, but even that couldn't stop the inevitable from happening.

Ignoring all the messages and notifications, I pull up my best friend's number and click dial. Callie picks up on the third ring. "Yasmin? Where are you?"

"Is Hayden with you?" I ask, ignoring her question. My voice sounds funny to my own ears, detached and empty. But I have to say this, and I don't think I'll be able to do it twice.

"Yes, why? What's going on? Do you know where Nixon is? We haven't heard from him in forever." I can hear the worry in her voice, but I don't have it in me to reassure her that everything is going to be all right. Not when I know nothing will ever be for those two people in the room down the hall.

"Callie," I say, not in the mood to go over this twice.

"Wait, I'll put him on speaker."

"Yasmin?" Hayden's voice comes through the line. There is rustling in the background. I'm not sure if they've returned from California or what time it is. Not that I care.

I rub my hand over my face. My whole body aches, and my eyes feel like

somebody poured sand in them, but I know sleep won't come. "I need you to grab the guys and come here."

"Here where?"

"What's going on, Yasmin? You're scaring me. Is everything all right?"

"It's Nixon's mom." I swallow hard. "She just died."

As soon as I hear the sound of the car pulling up in front of the house I wipe my hands on the towel and go for the door. I've barely pulled it open when Callie collides with me, her hands pulling me into a tight hug.

"Oh, Yasmin."

Slowly, I will my hands to move and return her hug, patting her on the back.

"What happened?" Hayden asks, a grim look on his face. Zane and Maddox stand behind him, matching worried glances on their faces.

"Cancer," I whisper, rage at the stupid disease boiling inside of me.

"Fuck." Zane rubs his hand over his face.

"How long?"

I don't have to ask Hayden to explain himself. I can feel his frustration and overall helplessness. But I know I have to do this. I have to be the one to give them some kind of answers, what little I can, so they don't ask Nixon about it because I don't think he has it in him to answer.

It doesn't matter that Jade and Nixon knew she was dying, have been by her side this whole time, Helen's death has devastated both of them.

They stayed closed in the room for hours while I made some coffee and started cleaning. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I figured I might as well be useful.

After the door finally eased open, Nixon came out with a sleeping Jade in his arms. Even with her eyes closed, I could see how puffy they were, and her skin was all red from crying. I helped him take her to her room, thankful that at least one of them is out and doesn't have to face reality, at least for a little bit.

Shaking the memories away, I look at my friends. "Since Christmas. Well, before. But that's when they found out it was terminal."

That's when their father left them, leaving them to deal with their

mother's illness and slow death all on their own. But I don't say that out loud. If and when Nixon is ready, he'll share that.

Three months.

That's how long it took for the disease to claim her.

Three months.

It feels like barely enough time, but at the same time, a lifetime.

"Dammit." Hayden turns around, running his hands through his hair. "Why didn't he say anything?"

Callie pulls back and looks at me. "And how did you know?"

Sighing, I look around the group. If Nixon had only said the word, they would have been with him all the way. "He didn't want to burden anybody with it. And I found out by accident. That day when my car broke down. I called you, remember?" I turn to Callie, and she nods. "There was an emergency, so he brought me here with him. It wasn't exactly planned."

We stand in the doorway for a while, nobody saying anything. What is there to say, really? Nixon made a choice that he thought was best for him, and nobody can fault him for it.

"Where is he?" Maddox asks, breaking the tense silence.

I offer him a grateful smile. Out of all the guys, I know him the least, but he seems like a nice guy. "The last I saw him, he was in the study making arrangements."

I offered to help him, although I don't have a clue about organizing a funeral, but he said he needed to do this on his own, so I left him and a cup of coffee in the study.

Shifting my weight from one leg to another, I say, "I didn't tell him I called you guys. I'm not sure if he would have wanted you here, but I couldn't let him deal with this all on his own."

Hayden puts his hand on my shoulder, giving me a firm squeeze. "You did good."

I nod, although I'm skeptical about it.

I went against Nixon's wishes. It's the right thing to do, I'm sure of it, although I'm not certain he'll see it that way, but I'll deal with that fallout later.

"Where is the study?"

"Down the hallway, last door on the right."

Hayden nods and heads that way, Zane and Maddox at his heels.

Callie leans her head on my shoulder as we watch the boys disappear

down the hallway.

“How are you doing?” she asks softly.

“My mom isn’t the one who died.”

“Yasmin...”

“Terrible,” I concede, relaxing against her. “She was so young, so full of life. It’s not fair.”

“A lot of things in life aren’t.”

If anybody knows that all too well, it’s definitely Callie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

NIXON

“Are you angry with me?”

A hand touches my shoulder, startling me from my thoughts.

I lift my head, meeting Yasmin’s eyes in the reflection in the mirror. She’s wearing a simple black dress with long sleeves, her hair pulled back in a bun, just a bare hint of makeup on her face.

Even now, she looks so beautiful it almost hurts to look at her. My ray of sunshine, pulling me through all of this darkness.

I close my eyes, a stab of guilt piercing my heart.

Mom’s been gone three days, and the pain is as raw as it was that night when we watched her take her last breath. And while I’m devastated that she’s gone, devastated I’ll never hear her voice or see her smile again, a part of me is relieved. Happy even. Because she’s finally free. Free of all the hurt, all the pain and suffering.

Blinking the memory away, I concentrate on here and now. I pull at the knot of my tie, fixing it with more force than necessary. “Why would I be?”

Instead of pulling back, Yasmin forces me to turn around and face her. “I know you didn’t want to tell your friends and I called them regardless.”

“No, it’s...” Sighing, I let my hands fall to my sides. “It’s fine. I’m glad they’re here.”

I was surprised when they barged into the study just as I was finishing the final arrangements. As it turns out, there wasn’t that much to do. Apparently, when Mom found out the cancer was terminal, she made the arrangements on her own before she got too bad to be able to do so. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be pissed off at her or relieved; I guess I was a little bit of both. But before I could think too much about it and fall further down the rabbit hole, the guys showed up. Their grim faces told me they knew what had happened.

One by one, they filled the room. Hayden went straight for the mini-bar, taking the most expensive bottle of whiskey in my dad’s arsenal and unclasping it. He didn’t even bother with glasses, just took a swig from the bottle, and silently offered it to me. So we sat and drank, nobody saying anything. It was exactly what I needed at that moment, and I didn’t realize it until I saw them.

“Are you sure?” she asks, not looking at me. Shaking her head, she undoes my tie and reties it with a calm efficiency that is so like her.

“Positive.” I try to offer her a smile, but it comes out twisted. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Last winter, my best friend’s brother scored me a waitressing job at some high-class fundraiser. They gave me this fancy uniform, tie included, so I looked at some YouTube tutorials.”

“Of course you did.” Is there anything this girl can’t do? Seriously. “C’mon. We have to grab Jade.”

Losing Mom has hit me hard, but it devastated Jade. She’s been closed off in her room, refusing to leave it. Yasmin managed to talk to her a couple of times and forced her to eat something, but for the most part, she stayed inside, crying her eyes out.

I felt completely powerless, not knowing what to do to make it better. Was there even a way? If there was, I could use it myself. I’d find a way to deal with it, somehow, some way. But Jade... she’s just a teenage girl who lost her mother, and I’m clueless on how to help her.

Yasmin’s fingers wrap around my wrist and pull me to a stop before I can open the door. “Do you want me to get her?”

I look at her for a long moment. It would be so easy to nod and have her handle it. She seems to know better how to take care of my sister than I do, but that isn’t the answer.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ll get her. Meet you downstairs?”

Yasmin’s thumb brushes over the inside of my wrist, the move so soft and tender it sends shivers up my arm.

“Sure.”

Together, we walk into the hallway. I stand still, watching her go, her heels clicking against the hardwood as she descends the stairs. Only when I’m sure Yasmin’s out of reach, do I let my guard down. Tilting my head back, I inhale sharply.

You can do this, Cole.

Crossing the hallway, I stop in front of Jade’s door and knock. The sound echoes through the otherwise empty hallway. It somehow feels quiet, desolate, even with all my friends staying in the house. Like the very soul was sucked out of the place and has gone along with Mom’s spirit. She was the one who made this place home.

I wait a while, but there isn’t an answer.

“Smalls?” I call as I tentatively push the door open and peek inside.

Jade’s standing in front of her dresser, her hands gripping the edge of it as

she cries silently.

Entering the room, I go straight to her, wrapping my arms over her trembling shoulders. “Hey, it’s okay.”

“I-it’s not o-okay,” she sobs. “S-she’s g-g-gone.”

Tightening my hold on her, I let her turn around and burrow her head into my shoulder. “I know. I know.”

“I don’t think I can do this. I can’t... Nix, it’s too...”

I take a step back so I can look at her. Her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy, cheeks pale. “We have to do it. For her.”

And I don’t think I can do this without you.

So, so selfish. Even now.

“I’m not sure I’m strong enough.”

My throat bobs as I swallow. Pushing back all the feelings that are swirling inside me, I lock them down tight. Jade needs me. I need to be the strong one. For her. Since I’m the only family she has left.

“That’s why you have me.” I wipe her tears. “We’ll do it together.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” the woman in front of me says, giving my hand a tight squeeze. “Your mom was a wonderful person. She’ll be dearly missed.”

“Thank you,” I say on autopilot. My mouth feels dry from the number of times I’ve said those words by now, the hollow in my chest growing bigger every time I do.

I did my best to detach my mind from my body, knowing it’s the only way I can survive this day, but it wasn’t easy. Jade isn’t much better. Her face is expressionless as she receives the condolences. She’s stopped crying, but looking at her like this, I’m not really sure that’s a good thing. When she was crying, I knew she felt *something*, while now she just looks like an empty shell.

The woman moves down the line while another one appears in front of me. It seems like we’ve been at this for hours.

Mom was a well-loved person. All of our neighbors are here, people both me and Jade went to school with, and their parents, our parents’ friends, and even some of our distant relatives came, which is a surprise since we haven’t

been close to any of them.

Yasmin sucks in a breath that has me lifting my head to see what has upset her.

When we came to the church all of my friends took the first row in a show of support. Except for Jade, they are now the only real family I have left. But I couldn't let go of Yasmin, so I tugged her after me, holding on to her hand the whole time. My palm is sweaty, and I stopped counting the number of times people gave her a curious look, but not once did she complain or ask to leave, and I was grateful for that.

It doesn't take me long to realize what caused her reaction. On the other side of the room, Coach is standing by the door, staring directly at us while my teammates are slowly coming in. His eyes are locked with Yasmin's for what seems like an eternity, different expressions passing over his face, before he schools his features in a cool and composed mask I know all too well.

I tighten my grip on her hand. "Did you call him?"

It's something she'd do for me. Something she has already done for her mother. Because Yasmin is selfless like that, always putting other people before herself.

Yasmin shakes her head no. "It wasn't me."

Then it must have been Hayden, not like it matters. They're here now. One by one, my teammates come down the aisle to the front, shaking my hand and offering me their condolences.

"I'm so sorry, Nix." Prescott pulls me into a one-armed hug, slapping my shoulders. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Thanks. It just wasn't the right time and..." I shrug, not really knowing what to say; it all seems so pointless now.

"There is never a right time, but we're family, Nix." He shakes his head at me, and I can see that he's really upset by the whole thing. "We have your back no matter what, field or no field."

"I know you do. I'm sorry I didn't say anything."

"Just pick up the damn phone if you need anything, got it?"

"Got it."

With another slap on my shoulder he moves down and joins the rest of the guys who have already taken their seats.

"Cole."

Slowly, I turn around. "Coach."

He's watching Yasmin, who suddenly seems to find her shoes rather interesting. I clear my throat, which snaps his attention back to me. "I'm so sorry about your mother, Nixon." He offers me his hand for a handshake.

"Thank you, Coach." I shake his hand. "And thanks for coming."

"Sure thing. If there's anything we can do to help, you let us know, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

He nods and gives another look to Yasmin before rather reluctantly walking away.

"Are you okay? If this..." But I don't get to finish because just at that moment the priest decides to come.

"Son, are you ready to begin?"

A lump the size of a football appears in my throat. My palms turn so sweaty with nerves I have to rub them against the side of my legs.

No, I want to yell at him. I'm not ready to say goodbye to my mom. I'm not ready to bury her six feet under. I'm not ready to say goodbye to all the things that should have been but were taken away from us way too early.

I'm. Not. Ready.

I don't think I ever will be.

Yasmin grabs my hand. My head snaps up, my gaze focusing on her. Only her. And it's only then that I remember to breathe again.

I'm here, she mouths. *You've got this*.

I don't, but with her next to me, I think I might just get through this in one battered piece.

I'm about to nod when the door opens once again. Spinning around, I stop dead in my tracks when I see the person standing in the doorway.

What the hell is he doing here?

The rage that I've been pushing back comes out front and center. My hands clench by my side in tight fists.

"Excuse me," I say through clenched teeth and storm toward him. I can hear Yasmin calling my name from behind me, but I ignore her. Not even she can stop what's about to happen.

"Nixon," he says, opening his arms for a hug.

A fucking hug.

Like nothing has happened. Like he hadn't walked out on us more than three months ago, letting us deal with our mother dying all on our own. Like he hasn't been MIA all this time, not once bothering to call or text, or hell,

even send a letter by pigeon or some shit.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hiss at him.

“Is that a way to greet your father?” His hands fall down by his sides, his smile faltering. How can he smile? His wife of over twenty years is fucking dead, lying in a coffin, mere feet away from us.

“Some fucking nerve you have,” I whisper quietly, closing in on him.

Who the hell is this man? I thought I knew my father, but the man I knew, the man I loved and admired all my life wouldn't have done something like this. He wouldn't have *left*.

“Coming here now, after all this time.”

People start whispering, and I'm sure I can even hear a gasp from somewhere behind me.

“Nixon.” A hand wraps around my arm, pulling me a step back. “You don't want to do this here.”

“Oh, I most certainly do.” I try to move closer to my dad, but Hayden holds me tight. I can hear the sound of more footsteps nearing as they echo against the marble floors.

Dad, if he can even be called that, runs his hands through his hair. For a man who's always prided himself in looking his best he looks completely disheveled. His hair is a greasy mess, and a few days' stubble covers his jaw. His suit and shirt are wrinkled, tie loosened around his neck, buttons undone.

Good, the bastard deserves it for all he put us through.

“It's not what you think. I—”

“Oh, it's not?” I move even closer, so close our noses are practically touching. I have a couple of inches on him, and I use them to my advantage. “You didn't *leave* us just as shit got rough and left us to deal with it on our own? You haven't been absent for months, with no words whatsoever so that we can know you're at least alive? You've called Mom or Jade to ask if they're okay or need something?”

Each question is accentuated with a stab of my finger in the middle of his chest, forcing him to fall back until his back hits the door.

“You can't talk to me like that,” he snaps loudly.

For the first time, I notice that the room is so quiet you can practically hear a pin drop. He must notice it too because he takes a deep breath as if to calm himself. That's one of us. I'm fuming, and there is finally somebody I can direct my anger at. “You wouldn't understand. I couldn't do this again. I couldn't watch the love of my life...”

This time I laugh. “That’s rich. The love of your life? Where were you when she was dying from cancer these last few months, huh? Where were you, dammit?”

I grab him by his rumpled shirt and lift him off the ground. He protests and tries to wiggle out of my hold, but the only way he’ll do that is if I let go.

“Nixon.” A hand grabs my arm and tugs. I’m so overcome with rage it takes me a moment to realize the person pulling me back is Yasmin. Her voice is soft, but there’s nothing soft about the way her fingers dig into my skin.

“Don’t do this,” she pleads. Her fingers brush against my jaw, drawing my attention to her. My resolve crumples to the ground slowly but surely the longer I look at her face. Her tongue peeks out, wetting her lips. “She wouldn’t want you to do this. Not here, not now.”

I close my eyes, forcing myself to take a breath.

“Let him go. Please.”

What the hell have I been thinking? It’s my mother’s funeral, and I’m letting him destroy it, taint it with his presence and my asshole behavior. Like father, like son.

“Please, think about Helen. Think about Jade,” Yasmin whispers, so low I’m probably the only person who can hear it.

Unclenching my fingers, I let him fall to the ground and pull back. “Get out.”

Yasmin uses this opportunity to slip between the two of us, her arms wrapping around my middle.

“You can’t make me leave. I have every right to...”

My eyes snap open, body tensing. Yasmin tightens her hold on me. “You either get the hell out this very moment, or I’ll make you leave. It’s your choice. I’m sure you’d rather we don’t make a scandal.”

“Sir...” Prescott steps closer, and for the first time, I notice my friends surrounding us. Always having my back. “I think you should leave.”

Dad looks at us, probably also realizing that he’s outnumbered. “Fine.” He points his finger at me. “But this isn’t done.”

No, it’s not. It was done long before now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

NIXON

“They’re gone,” Hayden says as he comes back into the living room.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh in relief. “Thank God. If they’d stayed even a second longer, I think I’d have thrown them out through the closed window.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “I’ve got your back.”

And he had. I don’t think we would have managed to survive this day without my friends present. “Thanks, man.” I look around. There are still some things that need to be cleaned, but I want to go up and check on Jade. She’d been holding on strong until that asshole showed his face. Once the ceremony started, she turned into a mess. Not that I was any better. If it weren’t for Jade needing me, and Yasmin standing by my side, I wouldn’t have made it through.

“Go to her, we’ll take care of the house.”

I nod. There are no words to express how grateful I am to them for showing up, although all I did in the last few months was push them away.

“I’ll be back in a bit, I just need to make sure she’s okay.”

I quickly work my way out of the room and up the stairs. The second floor is quiet, but that’s to be expected. Walking down the hallway, I stop in front of Jade’s room. I knock softly, not wanting to startle her if she’s awake. When there is no answer, I slowly turn the knob and open the door.

“Jade?” I peek inside.

The small lamp on the nightstand is turned on. I’ve noticed that she’s started to do that lately, but I don’t want to make her feel uncomfortable, so I haven’t asked any questions. But when I look at the bed, I find it empty.

Pushing the door open, I enter the room. “Jade?” I call, this time louder, but once again, there is no answer.

Panic starts building inside of me, making my heart race. I clench my sweaty palms tight, hissing softly when my nails dig into the skin.

Where is she? She couldn’t have gone, could she? Somebody would have seen her.

I take a sweep of the room, hoping to see her hiding somewhere. But she isn’t five anymore, and this isn’t a game of hide-and-seek. My eyes fall on the bathroom door.

I debate for a split second.

She would have heard me call her the second time if she was in the bathroom.

If she was okay, she would have heard.

All the tears she cried lately come back to my mind. How hard it was for her when Mom died. How quiet she's grown over the past few months, so unlike the girl I used to know.

I cross the room on shaky legs and turn the knob. "Jade, I'm coming in. This isn't fun—"

The words die on my lips as the panic turns into full-blown, bone-chilling fear.

Front and center in her bathroom is a huge bathtub. I still remember how much she begged Dad to get her one when we were remodeling. From a young age, she could have spent hours in that thing, and you couldn't get her out. She grew even worse over the years.

Of course Dad conceded; after all, she was his little princess.

"J-Jade?" My voice breaks as I call out her name.

The tub is full, but instead of soaking inside it, there is only a shadow floating underneath the surface.

"Jade!"

My scream echoes inside the bathroom walls. I rush forward, falling down to my knees next to the tub. I reach inside, wrapping my arms around Jade's limp body and pulling her out.

She has to be okay. God, please don't let her die. I don't think I can take one more loss. Please... just, please...

A sharp inhale startles me, and it takes me a moment to realize it's Jade. Jade breathing.

She's alive.

"Jade? Are you okay?"

Ignoring her nakedness, I pull her all the way out and onto the floor. The rug underneath us is soaked with water, but neither of us cares.

She's alive.

I pull a towel off the rack and wrap it around Jade's shaking body as she coughs loudly, getting the water out of her lungs.

Wrapping my arms tightly around her, I pull her in for a hug. My whole body is shaking with suppressed adrenaline, making it hard to concentrate, but one thought echoes in my mind over and over.

She's good.

She's good, and she's breathing.

She's good.

Pulling back, I cup her cheek and lift her head so I can see her face. Her eyes are red-rimmed, from tears or from being underwater, I'm not sure. The blue of her irises is completely dull and lifeless. "What the hell were you doing?" I ask, shaking her shoulder. "What were you thinking?"

"I needed it to stop!" Jade shakes her head, tears or water falling down her cheeks as she covers her ears with her hands. "I just want it to stop."

"Needed what to stop?"

"This pain." She presses her hands against her chest. "I needed this pain to go away. I needed to erase the sound of her heart stopping, and this was the only thing that worked!"

"You could have died!" I protest, shaking her harder. Tears that I've been holding at bay all day—hell, for months—finally break free. "You could have drowned," I repeat louder.

Doesn't she get it? How could she do something like this? How could she let something like this happen?

Jade tries to push me back, but I'm not budging. "If that'll make it go away so be it!" she yells loudly.

I flinch back, not believing her words. She must feel the same because her eyes grow wide, lip trembling, as her words set in.

"You can't say shit like that, Jade. You can't..." I shake my head and close my eyes. More tears slide down. My throat bobs as I swallow the lump that formed in my throat. Wiping my nose with the back of my hand, I look at her. "I know it's hard. I know it hurts. I hurt too, but you can't do things like that. You can't..."

Die, I finish silently.

"Nix..."

You can't die because why the hell should I continue living then?

"C'mon." I help her up to her feet, making sure the towel is wrapped tightly around her. "You need to get dry and put on some clothes." Kissing the top of her head, I push her toward the door. "Go, I'll clean up."

Once she's out, I bend down and take the plug out of the bathtub. Straightening, I watch all the water flow down the drain.

She could have died. Right here, right now. In her childhood room.

She. Could. Have. Died.

Running my fingers through my hair, I tug hard at the strands. My head

falls back as more tears cloud my vision.

How did I not see it? How did I miss the signs? What else did I miss?

Kicking one of the wet towels with my leg, I scream silently, not wanting her to hear me. Only when the worst of the anger is out of the way, do I exhale slowly.

Jade first.

I grab some towels and throw them onto the floor to mop up the rest of the water that spilled when I dug into the tub to grab her.

She could have died.

Those words ring in my mind as I straighten the room, giving Jade time to put some clothes on. My eyes scan the space looking for... something.

Shaking my head, I turn around and go back into the bedroom.

By now, Jade is in her pajamas, sitting in the middle of her bed. She looks so small, so young, so lost.

Bracing myself, I go to her and sit at the edge of the bed. Taking one of her hands in mine, I trace the line on her palm.

“You can’t do shit like that,” I rasp out softly.

“Nixon, I—”

“P-promise me, Jade.” My voice breaks. Closing my eyes, I force myself to swallow before trying again. “Promise me you won’t try to do what you just did in there.” I look her straight in the eyes. “Promise me that if it becomes too much, you’ll come to me. You don’t have to deal with this on your own. You’re not alone.”

Slowly, she nods her head. A tear slips down her cheek. “I-I promise.”

Nodding, I lean down and press another kiss against her temple. “Good. I can’t lose you too, Smalls. I just...” I shake my head. “Can’t.”

Wiping her tears, I pull the covers up and tuck her in like she’s a little girl once again. “I’m here now, you sleep tight.”

She snuggles closer to me, locking her fingers in mine tightly.

“Stay with me?” she whispers. “Just until I fall asleep?”

“Anything,” I promise. And it’s a promise I plan to keep.

“Night, Nix.”

Her eyelids fall shut, heavy with sleep, but the grip of her hand on mine stays unwavering. I watch her as she drifts off, her chest rising and falling steadily. With my free hand I keep smoothing her hair.

She could have died tonight.

Tears start falling once again, and this time I don’t bother hiding them.

Not when I'm sitting all alone with a sleeping Jade by my side.

I'm not sure how long I stay like that, just crying silently. Mourning the loss of the best woman that ever walked this earth. Mourning the loss of everything that could have been but will never happen because she was taken way too soon. Crying because my sister is hurting so bad she would contemplate taking her own life, and I don't know what the hell to do about it.

Only once the tears dry up, and I'm sure Jade won't awaken, do I get up. Placing one last kiss on top of her head, I pull the covers tighter around her before turning around.

I don't bother turning off the lights, but this time when I leave, I don't close the door either.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

YASMIN

“I think this is the last of it,” Maddox says as he puts a stack of dirty plates on the counter.

“Thank you,” I say, offering him a small smile. He blushes, nods, and goes back out of the kitchen.

There was a reception at the house after the funeral was over, and both Callie and I did our best to help out as much as possible. Picking up dirty dishes, restocking the trays with food, cleaning up, that sort of thing. Anything to help carry the burden for Nixon and Jade.

“I think the crowd is finally leaving,” Callie whispers, bringing a tray filled with glasses.

“It’s about damn time.”

“I know,” Callie says, shaking her head as she leans against the kitchen counter. “This was the hardest part for me. All I wanted to do was be left alone so I could grieve, but there were all these people there that I had to entertain instead.”

If anybody can understand how Nixon is feeling, it’s Callie. Both of them have lost their parents too early, her to an accident, him to cancer. It isn’t fair, but I know all too well that life rarely is.

Picking up the towel, Callie takes one of the pans I washed by hand and starts drying it. Together we work in silence.

“How is he doing?” Callie asks a while later, breaking the quiet.

“Not really sure.” I shrug, feeling helpless.

I want to help him, I want to take away his pain, but I’m not sure I’m the right person to do so.

Maybe Callie should be the one to try to talk to Nixon, to Jade. After all, they have experienced the same grief, something I can’t even imagine. Don’t want to imagine. Losing my mom, my only living family, would crush me. But not just that, it would leave me utterly alone.

Not completely, a little voice reminds me, but I push it back.

“Maybe if you talk to him, it would help.”

“Maybe.” Callie nods, her sharp blue eyes meeting mine. “But I’m not the person he needs. The person he *wants*.”

The light shines through the kitchen window, saving me from having to say anything. When I turn around, I find Nixon standing on the porch, his

hands gripping the railing.

“Go to him, I’ve got this.”

Not needing to be told twice, I dry my hands and go out to join him.

“Hey,” I say as I step onto the back porch. My appearance triggers the sensors, turning on the light, and I see Nixon standing against the fence.

He turns around to face me. “Hi.”

He’s still wearing the black shirt and suit pants that he had on earlier today, but somewhere along the way he lost his jacket and tie, leaving the top two buttons undone. Not for the first time in the last few weeks, I notice how tired he looks. His eyes are reddish and bloodshot, and the bags underneath them have grown bigger with each day that passes, the lines of his face turning harder and deeper.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask, a shiver running through my body.

The snow has melted, and the first signs of spring coming are here, but the night air is still cool. I wrap my arms around myself, rubbing them to warm up, even if just a little. I didn’t think to bring a jacket, but now that I’m out here, I don’t want to go back inside.

“Thinking...” Nixon lifts his hands, rubbing his face. He finally shaved this morning, changing back to the guy I met a few months ago. Physically, at least. Because I don’t think he’ll ever be the same again. I might not have known the loss that Nixon and Callie have experienced, but I’m familiar with the hole that is left inside you when you lose an essential part of yourself. I’ve had it all my life. “I just needed some alone time.”

“Today has been a lot.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Nixon chuckles, the sound hard and completely unlike him.

He just buried his mother.

I move closer, needing to hug him, offer him the comfort he needs the only way I know how. But when I come closer, I notice that his clothes are darker, like... “Nixon, why are you all wet?”

“Funny you should ask.”

A chill runs through me, cutting me to the bone.

“What happened?”

“I went to check in on Jade.”

“Jade?”

Jade was holding it all in for most of the day, but when the ceremony started, she just broke. She managed to survive the ceremony, holding onto

both Nixon and me, but just barely. Then when we got home, the poor girl finally crashed.

“And it turns out that it’s good I did because I found her floating in her bathtub.”

Díos mío. My hand flies to my mouth, my heart skipping a beat as my stomach sinks with worry.

“Is she okay? Do we need to call an ambulance?”

“She’s fine. She’s sleeping now. But she’s not okay. She tried to commit suicide, Yasmin!”

He turns around and, before I can see it coming, slams his fist into the railing, the force of the punch splintering the wood.

I wince as I see a flash of blood on his knuckles, my hand flying to cover my mouth.

“She tried to...”

“Nix, I’m so...” I try to wrap my arms around him, but he moves away from my touch.

“Don’t. Just, don’t.”

I gulp, feeling like he slapped me. I know this isn’t about me, about us, but his rejection hurts more than I can explain.

He runs his fingers through his hair, pulling at the messy strands. “I can’t do this.”

My heart aches for him. For his pain. First his mom, and now Jade. If he’d been just a few seconds later, would Jade have succeeded?

I don’t want to believe Jade would have gone through with it, but I can’t be sure. Jade is hurting now, and there is nothing anybody can do to take that pain away. She’ll have to learn how to live with it, hoping time will help seal some wounds if not heal them completely. But was she aware of what she was doing? How it would affect people around her? How it would affect Nixon? Because I don’t think he can take one more heartbreak.

“Why don’t you let me help you?”

He shakes his head. “I can’t do this, Yasmin.”

“Can’t do what?” I ask carefully, my heart sinking. He can’t mean...

“This thing.” He points to the space between us. “I can’t. It’s all too much. Mom, Dad, Jade... I can’t add you to the mix.”

“W-what are you saying?” The words tumble out quietly, my voice rough.

“What I’m saying is...” he starts, but then stops. Just when I’m about to

ask him to explain he continues, “The guys are going back tonight. I think you should go with them.”

My heart stops as I just stare at him, not understanding where he’s going with this.

He wants me to... go?

“W-what?” I stutter, confused with the turn this conversation has taken. “Are you breaking up with me?”

The words come out before I can stop them. I’m not even sure why that is the first question that comes to my mind. But it’s already out there, and there is no going back.

Nixon just stands there, staring at me. The longer he’s silent, the more my stomach clenches with unease.

“Nixon?”

“I—” Nixon massages his temples with slow movements. “I can’t do this, Yasmin,” he repeats as if those words explain everything.

What does that even mean? I want to scream at him, demand he give me an answer, but it’s like I’m glued to this spot, unable to move.

“Can’t or won’t?”

Instantly, I feel bad for putting him in this position. He’s been dealing with so much, and I’m asking him about us?

Is there even an us? We never defined anything. It was supposed to be just that one time. Until that one time became two and then three and then four. Until being without him left me wondering what he was up to and what was going on in his life. Until there was an ache in my heart when he wasn’t around or when I saw him hurting. Until I wanted to erase that hurt and make him feel better.

He lets his hand fall down, his fingers clenching in a tight fist. “Can’t. I can’t be what you need and at the same time take care of my family.”

“I can help you.” I grip his hand in mine. “Let me.”

But before I can even finish he’s already shaking his head no. It shouldn’t hurt, but it does.

“You’ve spent more than enough time here, Yasmin. I have to figure this shit out on my own.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to push me away and stay here to *deal* with this on your own?”

“It’s best like that.”

“For who?”

“For everybody.”

“Liar.”

The word echoes in the empty night. My chest is heaving as I watch him, waiting for him to say something. *Anything*. But he stays utterly stoic, his face wiped of any expression.

My heart aches for him, for me, for us. But at the same time I know there isn't anything I can do. If Nixon has decided he has to deal with this on his own, he'll do it like that regardless of what anybody says.

Closing my eyes for a second, I force my lungs to open so I can inhale deeply. Only when I know I won't break, do I look at him.

“Goodbye, Nixon,” I whisper, and then I walk away, leaving my heart behind.

“Have you talked to him?” Callie whispers in my ear.

“Nope, just like I said the other thousand times you asked,” I say, not bothering to lift my eyes from the screen as I continue typing away.

Sighing, she leans her head on my shoulder. “He'll come around, I know it. He just needs time.”

That's what she's been telling me for days, ever since we left Nixon without saying goodbye. I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince anymore, herself or me? Well, we didn't say goodbye, since he didn't bother walking us out. Nixon and I, we said what we had to, now the ball is in his court. I offered to help. He didn't want it—didn't want *me*.

“Maybe.”

I wasn't so sure about it, but I didn't want to get into *that* discussion. Not now, not ever, and definitely not with Callie.

“Are you all right?”

“I'm not the one who lost her mother, Callie. I'm fine. Just busy.”

Since coming back to campus, I've thrown myself into work. It was easier than thinking about a certain brokenhearted guy. And more pressing. I hadn't even realized how much I missed. I've always tried my best to be ahead in my classes so I could juggle all of it, but it feels like all I've been doing the last few days is running against time.

There was homework to finish, reading to catch up on, essays to write,

shifts to cover, and classes to attend. I was working myself to the bone, barely getting a couple of hours of sleep each night, and even after a week I still haven't caught up on everything.

My professors were already giving me dirty looks because I've missed a few classes and couldn't keep up with what we were working on, but no matter how much I tried, there was just never enough time in the day.

It feels like history repeating itself, and that's what scares me. First semester I worked really hard to get where I was at and, in the span of a few weeks, it all fell apart like a house of cards.

Callie narrows her eyes at me. "You look tired."

I *feel* tired. Worse than that, I feel empty. But there is no way I'll admit that out loud.

"That's why I'm going to stop by Cup It Up to grab coffee before I go to the library. Wanna join?"

Callie jumps to her feet and grabs her bag. "Is that even a question?"

Just mention coffee and she'll forget about anything. At least this time, it's going in my favor.

The consistent buzzing wakes me up. I moan in protest, squeezing my eyes shut. Both my body and mind are so tired I can barely move. The buzzing stops, but starts again shortly after. I try to wave my hand over my ear, hoping if it's a mosquito or fly or something, I'll make it go the fuck away and leave me alone, but it doesn't stop.

Groggy, I open one eye.

Fuck.

My phone.

I jolt upright, my aching muscles protesting the sudden movement. Half blind, I reach for my phone and swipe to answer it.

"Hello?"

My voice is breathless, heart galloping a hundred miles a minute. Maybe it's Nixon finally reaching out. Maybe he decided that he made a mistake and realized that he can't do this all on his own, that he needs his friends. That he needs *me*.

"Yasmin? Where are you?"

My excitement instantly dies down like a deflated balloon.

“Coach.” I lean back in my chair and massage my throbbing temples. Just another man I haven’t seen in a while, but in this case it was me who did the avoiding, not the other way around. “Why are you calling me?”

He’s had my phone number, but in all this time he hasn’t used it once.

“Maybe because you should have been here an hour ago?” he says, clearly irritated with the whole situation.

An hour...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Tuesday. How could have I forgotten? Why hasn’t my alarm gone off?

“Are you...”

“I was studying and lost track of time.” Standing up, I look down at my clothes, an old pair of leggings and wrinkled t-shirt. I’m a mess, but it’s been my go-to lately. It’ll have to do. “I’ll be there in a bit.”

“You look like shit,” Coach says as soon as he opens the door.

“Thanks,” I say dully. Shoving him out of my way, I slip inside. “I’d say it’s good to see you, but we both know it’d be a lie.”

You just have to get through this, I chant over and over in my mind. But even that doesn’t help this time.

“Cut it on that attitude, will ya? I was worried when you didn’t show.”

“Well, you have a funny way of showing it,” I say sarcastically as I take my usual seat in the kitchen.

Coach stops in the doorway, looking at me contemplatively. “Were you with him?”

“Him who?”

I know what he’s asking. There is only one *him* Coach could be talking about with that gloomy scowl etched into his face, but I don’t have to make it easy for him.

“Don’t play coy with me. One of my players, Yasmin? Really?”

And there it is, the reason why I was wary of seeing him even more than usual.

I should have known it wouldn’t take him long to bring Nixon up. The last time I saw Coach, I was standing by Nixon’s side when he was burying

his mother. Coach isn't one to beat around the bush, so it was bound to happen sooner rather than later.

"I don't see how Nixon has anything to do with this. I told you, I was late..."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard it all." He waves me off. His bushy brows connect as his scowl deepens, eyes narrowing at me. "I'm not just talking about today."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"You dating one of my players behind my back, that's what I'm talking about!" he yells, a throbbing vein appearing on his forehead.

Well, that escalated quickly.

"I don't see how that's any of your business. Whatever is or isn't happening between me and Nixon is of no concern to you."

"No concern to me?" He stalks closer, hands fisted by his sides as he looks down at me. "You're my daughter, and he's one of my star players, how is that of no concern to me?"

I get up, placing my palms on the table so forcefully the plates rattle. "Your daughter? Your *daughter*?! Nineteen fucking years, you had *nineteen fucking years*, and in all this time you've never, not once claimed me as yours, and you decide to do it now?"

"You'll not..."

My vision goes hazy, breaths ragged. Grabbing the first thing that comes to hand, I throw it at him. Unfortunately, I'm no quarterback so I miss my aim—his head—but there is still a little bit of satisfaction when the glass shatters.

"No, you've had long enough to say what you wanted, now it's my turn, because I'm done with this shit. You left my mom when she was pregnant. Left *me*. And not once did you bother turning back."

"Yas—"

I take another thing, this time a plate, and throw it at him.

"Not once!" I cry out.

I'm done. Done with men in my life leaving, and throwing me away. Done with being the second choice. Just done. "When I wanted you, when I needed you, you weren't there! Not when I fell off my bike and scraped my knees. Not when boys in school were teasing me about my braces. Not when I was bullied for being Latina. Not when Mom got sick. Not once when I needed you, were you there."

I inhale sharply, choking on air.

“The funny part is, if you’d come back at any point, I’d have taken you back openhearted because I was that desperate to find the missing piece of me and get it back. And even in the end, after I swore to myself I wouldn’t do it, I had to be the one to call *you* for help. Not because of you, or because of me, God knows I gave up on you years ago, but because of her. Because I knew how much me going to college meant to Mom, and I couldn’t bring myself to let her down. So no, *Daddy*,” I say, the irony dripping from my voice. “So no, you don’t get to call me your daughter. Not now, not ever.”

Silence settles over us, the only sound my hard breathing.

Coach runs his hand through his hair, uncomfortable. “I’m just worried about you.”

“Worried about me? Funny, because to me it sounds like the only thing you’re worried about is your precious game and players.”

It’s always been about the game for him. The thing he put first and nothing else could ever come even close; not love, and surely not a child.

Sometimes, when I was younger, I wondered if it would have made a difference if I were born a boy and not a girl. Maybe then he would have loved me.

But I wasn’t that little girl playing what-if games.

Not anymore.

“Nixon has been going through a lot.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I was there, standing by his side through the better part of it.”

“Then you should know it. Besides, Nixon isn’t known to be...” He stops, as if he’s weighing his words carefully. “A one-woman kind of guy.”

I step back as if he slapped me.

“What are you saying?” My words come out slow and measured.

I’m not sure what he’s playing at here, but I know I want no part in it.

“That maybe you should be careful with who you hang out with. I wouldn’t want to see you hurt.”

Oh, no he didn’t.

“Well, *Coach*, maybe you should look in the mirror the next time. After all, you know better than anyone what it’s like to be a womanizing manwhore. Nixon, for all his faults, at least cares about his family. You can’t say that about yourself, now can you?”

“Yasmin...”

I step back, avoiding his outstretched hand. “I thought I could do this, but obviously I was wrong. I won’t be coming back again, Coach.”

Looking away, I step around him and hurry out of the room. This time he doesn’t try to stop me.

Tears fill my eyes, making my vision cloudy. Blindly, I walk down the corridor, hoping I don’t trip on my way out.

You won’t break. Not here. Not when he can see.

Pulling open the front door, I stumble outside, a sob ripping out of my lungs.

Why did I think this was going to be a good idea? Why did I think I could do it? It was foolish to think he couldn’t hurt me after all this time, foolish to think, that somewhere deep down, I don’t care anymore.

I don’t want to care. But why does my heart hurt so badly then?

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, thinking that maybe it’s him again, but it’s Mom.

Wiping the tears off my cheeks, I inhale a breath to try and calm myself before answering the call.

“Hola, mi niña.” Her cheerful voice breaks my heart all over again.

“M-Mamá.” My voice shakes as I answer. I pray to God that she doesn’t notice but of course she does.

“Is something amiss?”

“It’s...” I sniffle. “It’s all good. Just... A lot has been going on.”

Talk about putting it mildly.

“You sound funny. ¿Estabas llorando?”

“No, I—” Another sniffle. “It’s allergies.”

“Yasmin...”

I can’t tell her. Not yet. I can’t tell her the truth. I know I’ll have to, and soon. There is no way we’ll be able to afford Blairwood next year, but I can’t go another year like this. I just can’t.

“I’m fine, really. Look, I have to go. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

Mom’s quiet for a moment. “Está bien. Te amo, Yasmin.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

I manage to hold the sob until the line’s disconnected. Then I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold myself together.

“Yasmin?” a soft voice calls out.

I look up and find a flaming redhead in front of me. “Are you okay?”

“Alyssa.”

She looks at me worriedly, and then over my shoulder, making me realize I'm still standing in front of the coach's house.

What is she doing here? Does she know who the house belongs to? Did she see me getting out? Did she see me with *him*?

"C'mon." Alyssa wraps her arm around me, pulling me closer. "Let's get you out of here."

"How are you feeling?" Alyssa asks as she sits on the couch opposite me. As soon as she does, a small dog, a terrier of some kind, jumps into her lap. After making three turns, he sits down, making happy noises as he snuggles tight.

I didn't peg Alyssa for a dog person, but then again, apart from seeing her a few times and our night out together, I don't know much about her.

Taking a sip of my hot chocolate, I lower it down to my lap. "Better, thank you." I offer her a small, slightly strained smile. "I'm sorry, I'm usually not such a mess, but today has been..."

I leave the rest of the sentence hanging in the air, unsure of how to explain it without revealing too much about the reason behind my tears.

She waves her hand. "That's fine, I'm just glad that you're okay. I was worried something happened to you."

Looking down, I trace the rim of my cup with the tip of my finger. "A lot has been going on lately, and I think it all finally caught up to me."

"Sometimes a girl's just gotta cry."

Alyssa doesn't seem like a girl who cries, but then again, neither do I. Early on I learned that tears will lead me nowhere, so I considered them useless. But it seems like all I do is cry lately.

When I look up, I find Alyssa observing me quietly. I shift in my seat, suddenly uncomfortable under her scrutinizing stare.

Why is she looking at me like that?

"Was there a special reason why you were standing in front of Coach Davies's house?"

I inhale sharply, thrown off guard by her question. Although I don't know why, since it took her less than five minutes to lead me away from his house and into hers. So much for thinking nobody would see me come and go from

the coach's place; I was fooling myself into thinking I was safe, that my secret was safe. It was only a matter of time.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let's not play dumb." She rolls her eyes and takes a sip of her tea. Carefully, she puts the cup on the glass coffee table before once again giving me her undivided attention.

This was such a bad idea. What was I thinking? I shouldn't have come. When I saw her, I should have run in the other direction as far and as fast as I could.

She either doesn't notice the panic rising within me or she chooses to ignore it, because she continues, "That night at the club? I thought I knew you from somewhere, I just couldn't remember where. I thought I must have seen you with Callie at Maddox's at some point, but then I saw you again one night when I was walking Coco. Leaving Coach's house, just like today."

Think, Yasmin. Think.

"Is there a question somewhere in there?" I ask, trying to sound aloof. I'm not sure what she's implying, what she knows or *thinks* that she knows, but I'm not about to spill everything.

"Are you in trouble?"

"What?!"

Is she asking what I think she's asking?

"Are you in trouble?" she repeats, this time slower. "Given how I found you just now, it's a logical question to ask."

"No, I—" I shake my head. "No."

"Are you sure? I don't know what's going on between you two, and it's none of my business, but if he hurt you in some way—"

He hurt me, all right, just not how she thinks.

"No, he didn't hurt me."

Alyssa continues like she didn't hear me. "Because if he did, you don't have to stand for it. We can go to the police—"

Police?

"Alyssa, I'm fine, really..."

She stops suddenly, falling more into the cushion. "Oh... Well, if you say so." She sounds almost disappointed.

"But thank you, for offering." Her reaction wasn't anything like what I expected. You'd think people would assume the worst, like Nixon did, but she didn't seem to care one bit about why I was there, as much as she did

about the reason I was upset.

She smiles at me. “We girls gotta stick together.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

NIXON

“Jade?” I call out as soon as I enter the house. Putting the pizza box on the table next to the front door, I take off my jacket while at the same time toeing off my shoes.

“In the kitchen.”

In the past week, Jade’s been slowly coming out of it. She’s still been sad a lot, breaking down every time something reminds her of Mom, but she hasn’t been shut up in her bedroom all the time, so I’m calling it a win.

Picking up the box, I go down to the kitchen. “I grabbed your favor—” The words die on my lips as I see the man sitting at the kitchen table across from Jade. “What are you doing here?”

“This is still my house,” Dad says, leaning back in his chair.

“It stopped being your house the moment you packed your shit and left!”

“Nixon!” Jade yells, glaring at me.

“Go to your room, Jade,” I say, not leaving her space to argue. I don’t want her here to see what’s about to go down.

Tears fill her eyes at my harsh tone. “He’s our dad.”

I feel guilty for making her cry, but I can’t worry about that just now.

“Your room, Jade. Now.”

She glares at me, but does as I say. Her feet stomp against the stairs as she climbs to her room, followed by the door shutting loudly behind her. God, I just hope she doesn’t do something stupid.

“You have no right.”

“She’s my daughter, and this is my house.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Mom’s attorney called the other day, notifying us about the reading of her will. We were both supposed to be present, along with our father, apparently, so I asked him to give us a little bit more time. I was afraid that forcing Jade into this situation would trigger her once again, and all the progress we made recently will be for nothing.

“Why are you here?”

“I came to see my kids.”

“Try again. Make it believable this time.”

His lips press in a tight line. “What is your problem?”

“You.” I stab my finger into his chest. “You’re my problem. So tell me,

why are you here now? After all this time?”

He sighs, rubbing his hand over his face. “I came here to see my children. To talk.”

“To talk?” I chuckle humorlessly. “Now you want to talk?”

“Nixon...”

“No, don’t *Nixon* me. You have no right, *Dad*. Fuck it, you don’t even deserve to be called a dad.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly, trust me. I don’t give a damn about what you need or want now, I just want you gone. As far away from Jade and me as possible.”

We don’t need somebody who’ll pack his shit and leave at the first sign of trouble, not when there is so much uncertainty in our lives as it is.

“I loved her!” he yells. I can hear the desperation in his voice. I just don’t have it in me to care.

“If you loved her you’d have stayed!”

He shakes his head, running his fingers through his perfectly styled hair. He should have tried to look more heartbroken. “She was dying. My wife was dying.”

“My *mom* was dying too. Jade’s *mom* was dying, and you weren’t here for us. For her.”

“I couldn’t have gone through this. Not again. Watching Helen fight cancer the first time was hard enough.”

“Well neither could I, yet I stayed.”

We stare at each other, both of us panting hard. Finally, he shakes his head and turns to leave.

“Sure, leave,” I yell after him. “After all, that’s what you’re best at.”

I wait until the door closes behind him. Once I’m sure he’s gone I let my rage out. Grabbing the nearest thing to me, I throw it across the room. There is a loud cracking sound as the chair hits the wall and breaks in half.

“Fucking hell.”

My chest is rising and falling rapidly, following the wild beat of my heart.

How dare he? How dare he come after all this time and pretend that everything is all right? What did he think? That we’d accept him with open arms like nothing has happened? Fuck that.

Turning around, I kick another chair. This one slides across the room.

I inhale deeply.

I need to calm the fuck down before I destroy half the house and make an even bigger mess out of things.

“What is wrong with you?”

At the sound of Jade’s voice I turn toward the doorway. Her wide eyes look at me like I’ve gone crazy. Maybe I have.

I don’t know what the hell to do any more. There’s this anger, this rage inside of me, swirling and boiling, and if I don’t get it out, I feel like I’m going to burst.

“Me? What’s wrong with you? Why did you let him in?”

Jade glares at me. “I didn’t realize I had to let him in to his own house.”

“A house that he left of his own free will! Or did you forget that?”

“I didn’t forget anything, Nixon. But I’m also not about to chase away our last family member. He’s our dad.”

“Dad would have stayed, and he hasn’t!”

She crossed her arms across her chest, her chin lifting a notch. “Hello pot, meet kettle.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask quietly, my eyes narrowing at her.

“That means that you’re hardly one to say anything.”

“I was here.” I point at my chest. “I was here...”

“You were here when it suited you!” Jade interrupts me. Her lip quivers, but she doesn’t back down. “The only person who had to be here, day in day out, was me. Me, Nixon. I didn’t leave for college. I didn’t spend most of the week shooting the shit with my friends and playing football. I. Was. Here. I watched her puke her guts out. I listened to her cry late at night when she thought I was sleeping. I gave her medications so she wouldn’t be in so much pain. I helped her take showers and fed her. Me.” She points her finger at her chest. Tears are shining in her eyes but she doesn’t let them fall. “So, don’t you go pretending you’re any different. He was wrong, but he’s the only parent we have left. What the hell do you suppose I should do? Huh? If he’s not here then I have nobody.”

Every word she says is like a punch to my gut and, by the time she’s done, I can barely hold it together. The guilt I’ve been pushing back is slowly rising to the surface and suffocating me.

“I’m here,” I grit through clenched teeth.

“For how long exactly?”

“And you think he’ll stay any longer?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “But I’m willing to give him a chance to find

out.”

“Fine, you give him a chance, but don’t expect me to stay around and watch him leave one more time.”

With that, I storm out of the house before I say something I’ll regret even more than the words I already do.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

YASMIN

“That will be all for today’s class. I’ll see you all next week,” Dr. Stevens says, dismissing the class.

People around me start gathering their things and getting up, snapping me out of the daze I’ve been in.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t seem to concentrate. Not when the ghost of Nixon was so strong, especially between these four walls. My gaze seemed to find a way to his seat more often than not, the hollowness in my chest growing every time I’d realize he’s not here.

“You going?”

I turn to look at Heidi. “Yeah, sure.”

Quickly collecting my things, I listen to her chatter about one of her classes that’s been driving her crazy.

“Miss Hernandez?”

Turning around at the sound of my name, I see Dr. Stevens still standing at the podium.

“Yes?”

I slow my step until I come to a stop. It’s not exactly unusual for her to ask somebody to stay after class, but it’s not her regular practice either.

Did something happen?

She looks calm, but for some reason, that doesn’t give me comfort. Did I do something? Did she notice that my mind has been wandering? God, I’m an even bigger mess than I thought if my professors can see it.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?” Her eyes fall on Heidi standing by my side. “In private?”

I gulp and nod my agreement. Heidi’s big eyes meet mine. The uneasiness I’m feeling is written all over her face, but she tries to cover it with a shrug.

Talk later? she mouths, at which I nod once again.

I watch her go before slowly moving toward the desk where Dr. Stevens is waiting patiently. We stay quiet as a few more students roll out. They give me curious glances which do nothing to calm down my nerves. Different possibilities on what could be the cause of this conversation cross my mind, but the only thing it does is upset me even further.

“Is something wrong?” I ask as soon as we’re alone, slowly clenching and

unclenching my fingers by my sides. My hands shake slightly, a light sheen of sweat covering my palms. This reminds me too much of my senior year in high school. One year that, if I could erase it from my mind, I'd do it in heartbeat.

"I've really admired your work so far. You seem like a dedicated student who loves to learn and is careful about what she says, and makes sure her answers are correct before voicing them out loud. Every pop quiz you've solved almost to perfection. Every essay you've submitted so far was extremely well written and thought out. You dig deep, questioning most of the things even some of my older students don't."

"I..." I stop, unsure where she's going with this. This is all positive, right? The way she looks at me, though, tells me otherwise. "Thank you?" I finish tentatively.

I can feel a "but" coming, and I'm not sure I'm going to like it at all.

Her dark eyes narrow just slightly, her face turning grim. "That's why I hate even more to do this."

I swallow, but it feels like my heart has stopped in my throat, leaving me unable to breathe. Gulping down the lump in my throat, I whisper, "What is going on?"

Dr. Stevens stares at me intently, as if she's trying to figure me out. The silence stretches between us, air sizzling with anticipation. The need to scream at her to just get it over with already is overwhelming. She must sense it somehow, or maybe it's just written all over my face. "Are you aware that you missed the deadline to submit the final essay?"

Time around me stops, her words ringing in my ears. I try to remember what I've done this past week. "B-but that's next week?" My voice stutters as I try to go over my schedule in my mind. But it's hard with this constant buzzing in my ears.

Think, Yasmin. Think.

My mind is a mess, and the longer it takes me to remember, the more my panic grows. My heart starts galloping in my chest, my breath turning ragged, as if I've just run a marathon.

Could it be...

No, I'm sure it was next week. It can't be...

"No, the deadline was Friday before spring break."

Shit. No, no, no... This can't be happening. Not again.

"Between you missing the deadline and the pop quiz that happened earlier

that week, plus your low attendance in the last few weeks..." She shakes her head slowly. "I'm sorry, but you won't be able to pass this class."

"I-I..."

No words. I have no words left to say.

"Miss Hernandez..." Dr. Stevens keeps talking but I can't hear a word she says over the sound of my heartbeat echoing in my eardrums. Her lips move, but no sound comes out. She finally stops, and I realize she's waiting for an answer.

An answer I don't have.

"I... I have to go."

Not looking back, I run from the classroom and out of the building. It feels like the walls are squeezing in on me, sucking all the oxygen from my lungs. They burn, the pain the only thing that's grounding me.

How did this happen? I should have known better. Been better organized. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The door crashes against the wall as I push it forcefully open, making a few heads turn in my direction. I inhale sharply, needing my lungs to relax so I can breathe, but the only thing it does is make me choke.

Bending forward, I tap furiously at my chest until I start to cough.

Air, I need air.

Finally, after what feels like a lifetime, my lungs open up, and I can finally breathe again. My eyes are misty and filled with tears, clouding my gaze.

Blinking furiously, because I will *not* cry, not here, not now, I grab my phone out of my back pocket and try to crunch some numbers.

Maybe Dr. Stevens was wrong. My first few essays and quizzes were great, all As, and I was a model student until a few weeks back, so maybe, just *maybe*...

But when for the third time the numbers show me what I already knew, what Dr. Stevens told me, I know it's useless.

I fucked up.

Once again, I fucked my future up and this time, just like the last one, there's nobody to blame but me.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I'm about to turn it off when I see Callie's name flash on the screen.

All my worries about failing the class are pushed to the back of my mind. Callie isn't a caller. If she's calling that means something's going on. And

with how this day is going, I'm scared what it might be.

"Callie?" I ask, barely holding it together.

"Nixon's here," Callie says as soon as I pick up. Her voice is raised to be heard over the noises in the background.

Is that loud music playing?

"What? Where?" My heart kicks up a notch at the prospect of seeing him. My eyes scan the space, although rationally, I know he won't jump out of a bush.

"Yasmin." Something about the tone of her voice has me on edge.

I clasp the phone tighter, forcing the words out. "What's going on, Callie?"

"It's bad. We tried to talk some sense into him, but... You should come to the house."

"What the hell is going on?" I ask as soon as I get out of the car. I had to park on the front lawn because the street was full of cars, and by the sound of music erupting from the house, I know exactly where the mid-afternoon party is being held.

"It's been like this since we got here," Callie says, shaking her head. She's been waiting for me on the front porch, and by the look on her face I'm scared of what I'll find inside.

I bite at the inside of my cheek. "How bad is it?"

Her face turns into a grimace. "Bad."

A shiver runs through my body. I don't know what to expect when I walk inside, but I can't walk away, not knowing that Nixon is within these walls.

I can't do this.

It's all too much.

He might have given up on me, on us, but I can't let him deal with this pain all on his own. Not when I saw how much of the blame he puts on himself and how it's tearing him apart.

"As far as I can tell he's been drinking since he got here, or at least I hope he didn't drink *before* that, since he drove to Blairwood." Callie visibly shudders at the thought. "I know you guys are..." She shakes her head apologetically. "I figured maybe he'll listen to you, because he sure as hell

isn't listening to any of us."

"I'll go find him."

I knew it was a mistake to leave him all by himself. I could deal with him not wanting me there, but he should have at least asked one of the guys to stay with him. I could understand his need to take care of his sister and be the support she needs, but damn it, she's not the only one who needs support right now.

Yeah, you need it too. I push back the voice inside my head and enter the house.

This isn't the time to think about myself. Actually, I welcome the distraction. I can think about myself later, with a clearer mind. Even if there is nothing that can be done, at least I'll know that it wasn't all in vain. Not if Nixon is all right.

"Yas!" Callie tries to call after me, but her voice gets lost in the blasting music. There are quite a few people for such an early party, but I guess when the captain of the Ravens calls you, you don't say no.

I duck under the hand of one of Nixon's teammates and stop in my tracks. He's here.

Inhaling sharply, my lungs fill with air. The knot between my shoulders loosens, like a weight I haven't even known I've been carrying has finally been lifted.

It feels like I can *breathe* again.

Nixon is the piece I've been missing. A part of me stayed back with him, but now that he's here, I finally feel whole once again.

I just look at him for a moment. He's surrounded by a smaller group of people, a bottle in his hand as he laughs at something a girl next to him said.

My heart aches as I see him laugh. I haven't seen one of his smiles, his *real* smiles, in forever. Let alone heard him laugh. There was too much darkness in his life to find a reason for joy lately, and I missed it.

I missed *him*.

A part of me hoped that Callie was right, that Nixon just needed time to deal with all the things that have happened lately, and once he does he'll be back. But as the days passed, my hope diminished.

The girl's hand wraps around his arm. My heart stops as I watch her pull him down, her lips brushing against the corner of his mouth as she gets on the tips of her toes to whisper something in his ear.

Not just any girl.

Karen.

Chloe's roommate.

Seeing her cozying up to him, seeing Nixon letting her, is like a punch to my gut.

Did he already move on?

All the insecurities come rushing back at once, as all the fears that I've been fighting from an early age come back to the surface.

He isn't a one-woman kind of guy. Coach's mocking words come back to haunt me. I shake my head, refusing to give him power.

Nixon isn't like that.

Moving forward, I cross the distance between us until I'm standing next to him.

"Nixon."

His whole body tenses when he hears me. The music is loud, a complete contrast to my low voice, yet he can hear me.

Slowly he turns around to face me. A smile is plastered on his face, but it does nothing to hide the darkness eating at him on the inside. "Yasmin."

We stare at each other for what seems like forever. Time slows down, everything around us falling into oblivion. It's just him and me and all the demons surrounding us.

His. Mine. Ours.

Everything we've been trying to forget, to push back, finally coming back to haunt us.

"What are you doing?"

From up close I can see the details I couldn't when I was standing across the room. Like the fact that he lost some weight. The dark circles didn't disappear, they've only grown bigger since I last saw him, cheeks turning hollow.

He might be acting like nothing's going on but on the inside he's slowly dying.

"Having fun." Nixon flashes me a grin, but the dimple doesn't pop out.

"What does it look like?"

He sways a little on his feet, and I grab his hand to steady him. "It looks like you're getting drunk."

"That's the fun part."

I touch his face, but he flinches back. I try to hide the fact that his reaction hurts but I'm emotionally drained as it is. It's not even about the fact

that he doesn't want me to touch him, but that he's okay with *her* touching him.

He's hurting.

Well, I'm hurting too.

"Drinking so much you can't stand on your feet, which will probably soon lead to you puking your guts out? Sounds like super fun." Then I remember. "Is Jade here?" I look around, but don't see her between all the people. Have more of them arrived since I've gotten here? It couldn't have been more than a few minutes.

"Nope, she's a big girl, and she can take care of herself."

"You left her alone?"

After everything?

A different kind of panic creeps in at the thought of Jade all alone in her house. The house in which she spent months caring for her sick mother.

He shrugs. "She wanted it like that."

She wanted it like that?

What does that even mean? What the hell has happened since we left? Nixon wouldn't leave his sister alone, not after the bathtub incident. It just doesn't add up...

He tips the bottle, spilling some of the liquid over himself.

"Give me that, you've had enough." I try to reach for the bottle, but even drunk he's faster, pulling it out of my reach.

His friends laugh around us.

"Gimme some of that," Karen moans in her irritating, high-pitched voice. I expect him to refuse her, but he doesn't. Instead he offers her the bottle. She doesn't bother reaching for it, just wraps her lips around the opening and drinks as Nixon tips the bottle.

Some of the liquid drips onto her chin, and they all burst into laughter once again. When she signals she's done, Nixon pulls the bottle from her lips. Karen wipes her chin with her fingers and then exaggeratedly sucks on them.

"Is this your sort of fun?" I look at Karen, who gives me a smug, self-satisfied smile.

Bitch.

It's not even strange Chloe can't stand her.

"This was always my sort of fun."

"Not always," I counter. "You're drunk." I wrap my hand around his arm and pull him toward me. "You should sober up, and then we can talk."

Nixon pulls his hand out of mine with such force that I stumble back.

“There is nothing to talk about. And I’m just fine where I am.” He throws his hand over Karen’s shoulders. “You said it yourself, we were a one-time thing. Now it’s time for you to move on.”

If he wanted to hurt me, he found the perfect way to do it. I move back like he slapped me. Karen’s hand lands possessively over his pec, but I refuse to look at her. “You don’t mean it.”

He isn’t a one-woman man.

I can’t do this.

“We had fun, but now that fun is over.” He looks at me and then takes a pull from the bottle. The lips that were kissing me not even a couple of weeks ago, now touching something another girl touched.

Why does it feel worse than if he’d kissed her?

“You should know better than to fall for a player.” His eyes are hard, and there is this glint in them, almost maniacal. The one that reminds me of the guy I used to know. The one who accused me of sleeping around to get my way.

He isn’t my Nixon, not any longer. And I don’t think my heart can stand to find out what he has in store for me.

“You’re right, I should have known better.” I lift my hands, trying my best to seem unaffected. “Fine, have it your way. I’m done.”

Turning on the balls of my feet, I walk away from him. My lip trembles so I bite the inside of my cheek.

I’m not going to crumble. Not here. Not now.

Shoving people out of my way, I hurry toward the door. I have to get out of here before I do something stupid.

“Yasmin!” Callie calls after me but I ignore her.

A little bit more.

Just a little bit more and I’ll be out of here. Away from stupid boys who don’t know what they want. Players who break hearts.

You’re the only thing keeping me together.

Then why? Why did you have to tear me apart?

Tears cloud my gaze, my whole body shaking violently. I wrap my arms around myself, barely holding myself together.

I won’t break.

“Yasmin, wait!”

Silently cursing my friend’s insistence, I throw over my shoulder, “I can’t

stay here, Callie.”

If anybody should understand, it’s her. When things fell apart with her and Hayden she closed herself off in our room and tried her best to avoid anything to do with him. If she could do it, so can I.

But before I can reach my car, by some miracle she catches up to me. Her arms wrap around me from behind and she pulls me to a stop. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“No, it’s my own damn fault.”

“I’m going to kill him, I swear to you, Yasmin. He’s a dead man.”

I chuckle at the fire in her voice, but it’s broken by a sob. “I don’t want him to hurt. How is that normal? He hurt me, but just the thought of him in pain makes me want to throw up.”

“That’s because you’re a far better person than the rest of us.”

Another sob, this time louder, rips out of my lungs. “I have to get out of here.”

Callie’s grip tightens around me. “You’re not driving back to the dorm by yourself. Not like this.”

“Oh, and how should I get there?!” I yell at her. “Because there is no way I’m staying here. Not when he’s inside with *her*.”

He’s not a one-woman man.

If nothing else, Coach was right about this. They’re all the same.

Players. Cheaters. Heartbreakers.

“Well...” Callie looks around like she’s waiting for somebody to jump in and offer to drive us. If my chest wasn’t ripping to pieces, I’d find it funny. “I’ll drive you.”

I stop, my chest heaving. She’ll... did she just say what I think she said?

“But you don’t drive,” I point out.

Her throat bobs as she swallows. I can see that the nerves are getting to her, but she still grabs the keys out of my hands. “Today, I do.”

Callie wraps her arm around me, steering me toward my car. “C’mon. Let’s get you home.”

That... that’s the moment when I finally break.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

YASMIN

A loud knock wakes me from my sleep. I blink a few times, trying to pry open my swollen eyes, and somehow, after a few tries, I manage to do it.

Once I started crying it's like the dam inside of me that was holding all those feelings at bay broke, and there was nothing to hold it back any longer.

True to Callie's word, she was the one who drove us to the dorm—which took way more time than it should have, since she was driving barely five miles per hour, but I didn't have it in me to be irritated since she was *driving* me—and then we spent the night curled in my bed. She tried to convince me that he didn't mean it, that he's a jackass lost in his grief. And while he might be exactly that, I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep chasing after men, begging them to love me. Begging them to choose me. Begging them to *stay*. I just couldn't.

I love him, but I love myself more. And that means that I can't keep chasing after a guy who doesn't want me.

"Coming!" I croak, irritated when the person on the other side knocks yet again, this time louder. Maybe Callie came back but forgot her key or something. She got up early, but I didn't have it in me to do the same. I just wanted to curl up in my bed and not get up. What was the point anyway?

"Where's the fir— Mamá?"

I blink, not believing what I see. My mother is standing in front of me, all five feet and a row of dust of her. In my dorm room. At Blairwood.

Dark eyes that match mine take me in, her whole expression softening. "Yasmin, mi niña."

Something in me breaks at the sound of her voice. You'd think that with everything that happened yesterday, I didn't have any pieces left to break, but apparently I was wrong. I fall in her arms, embracing her tightly as my whole body shakes. "Mami."

I don't care that she's here, although she most definitely shouldn't be. I don't think about what will happen if she finds out the real reason why I'm at Blairwood or how I got here in the first place. I'm just happy to have somebody I love hold me close and tell me everything will be okay. That I'll somehow get through this.

Callie was amazing, but she doesn't get it, not really. She got her happily ever after. With one of Nixon's best friends, no less. She's Nixon's friend,

and I don't ever want to make her feel like she has to choose between the two of us. Nixon might have hurt me, but he already lost too much, I'm not about to take more from him.

So while I love Callie for all she did, it's different to have my *mom* here. Because no matter how grown up you are, a girl sometimes just needs her mother.

"Shhh, mi peque." Her arms tighten around me, slowly caressing my back.

"W-what a-are you d-doing h-here?"

"I knew something was wrong when we last talked, and since you didn't call me back afterward, I decided to come and see you for myself. Make sure you're okay."

"But your work..."

Mom waves me off. "I've worked hard enough. I can get a few days off, no?"

"Of course." I wrap her in another hug. "I'm so happy to see you."

"¿Qué pasa con esas lágrimas?"

I look away, ashamed. "Everything is falling apart, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't hold it together."

Not myself.

Not my classes.

And certainly not Nixon.

Mom's finger slides under my chin and turns me back to face her. Her thumb slides over my cheek to wipe away my tears.

"I messed up," I confess. "I messed up bad, Mamá."

"I'm sure that whatever it is, it can't be that bad. Nothing is unfixable."

I run my hand through my hair, pulling at the strands. "This time it's different."

"Different how?"

I gulp down, nervous. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for and dreaded at the same time.

"You'll hate me."

"Listen to me, Yasmin. There is nothing that you could ever do that would make me hate you."

She enters the room, going straight for my unmade bed. Sitting down, she pats the open space next to her. "Ven aquí. Tell me what's bothering you."

Nodding, I close the door and sit next to her. Mom wraps her arm around

me, and I lean onto her shoulder, pulling my knees to my chest.

“It all goes back to when you got sick...” I start, and then I tell her everything. She knows parts of it—after all, bills didn’t magically pay themselves—but I’ve hidden a lot in the past two years. Secrets that were eating at me from the inside out.

Failed classes. Lost scholarship. Reaching out to Coach. Going to Blairwood.

My life has been one big lie after another.

“So you see, I failed yet again, but this time it’s my own damn fault.”

Mom swats me over the head. “Language.”

“Sorry.”

“So you missed that one deadline?” she asks, smoothing her hand over the back of my head.

“The most important one. And with the classes I missed...”

“Because you were with that poor boy?”

“Nixon, yes.”

“While his mom was dying?”

“That’s beside the point. I should have worked harder, been more attentive to the deadlines, I should have...”

“You should have done nothing,” Mom interrupts me harshly.

I turn to look at her, surprised at her hard tone. “W-what?”

“You have spread yourself too thin.”

I shake my head. “I’m used to it. I’ve been...” I try to explain, but she interrupts me, not letting me finish.

“I know, you’ve always been a hardworking girl, and not just that, you’ve always had a big heart. Always giving to others, always trying to help.”

Not everybody sees it that way.

Now it’s time for you to move on.

“Maybe I gave too much,” I murmur softly. The pain isn’t as intense as it was yesterday, but it’s still a constant hum under my skin.

“What happened with that boy?”

We had fun, but now that fun is over.

You should know better than to fall for a player.

“He said he can’t do this anymore.” I shrug. “But is it even surprising? Just another man who didn’t think I was worth fighting for.”

Stay.

How many times did he say that word to me? Asked me to stay, when all

I wanted was to leave. I should have been smarter from the start. Should have guarded my heart better, if I had I wouldn't be in the position I am now. Heartbroken and alone.

Stay.

It's you who left, dammit.

A silent tear slips down my cheek, but I don't bother wiping it away.

"I'm so sorry that he hurt you, Yasmin, but you have to understand, he's hurting. You should give him time."

"Well, I'm hurting too!" I jump to my feet and glare at her. "And he's the one who's responsible for all of it. Besides, whose side are you on, anyway?"

Mom gets up and grabs my hands in hers. "Yours, always yours."

Exhaling slowly, I nod.

A small smile tugs at her lips. "You know what would make this better?"

I look up and see a hopeful smile on her lips that makes the corners of my mouth twitch.

"Dessert for breakfast," we say in unison, chuckling softly.

It used to be our thing. Every time things got hard, or one of us was sad, we'd get dessert for breakfast. It didn't make our worries go away, but it soothed our pain, if only for a little bit.

Did Jade and Nixon have something like that with their mother?

"Clean up and you can show me around."

Is he still on campus? And if he is, did he spend the night with Karen or any other girl from the party?

The mere thought makes my stomach turn.

"I'm not sure that's the best idea."

"Well, I think it's a *great* idea. C'mon now, I have a surprise for you."

CHAPTER FORTY

NIXON

I moan in protest as I hear the sound of hushed voices somewhere close by. My head is throbbing like a ticking time bomb. Shifting in the bed, I burrow it further into the pillow.

“I don’t care!” I hear somebody hiss in the distance, the sound so loud it’s like a stab in my brain, then quiet.

Utter.

Blissful.

Silen—

Splash.

I jump upright in bed as ice cold water is poured over my head. It takes a moment for my body to catch up to what happened, but when it does, a shiver runs through my frozen limbs. “What the fuck?!”

“Great, you’re awake.”

“Callie?”

Wiping the water from my eyes, I lift my head, and sure enough my best friend’s girlfriend is standing by my bed, a bucket in her hand, and a scowl on her face.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Her eyes narrow even further, if that’s possible. “Well if it were up to me, I’d have cut your balls off...”

“You’ve got me to thank for stopping that,” Hayden says, peeking his head through the doorway.

“So, I had to get creative.”

“What did I ever do to you, Cals? I thought we were friends.”

“Friends? If the last few weeks, especially last night, are an indication of how you treat your friends, the people you love, I want no part in it.”

“What—”

Callie releases the bucket. It falls by her side with a loud, resounding *thud*. She points her finger at me. “I warned you, Cole. I warned you what would happen if you broke her heart. And what the hell did you do? You went ahead and did exactly that.”

“Dude...”

I rub at my temples, still feeling the constant ache behind them. *What the hell is she talking about?*

Callie swiftly turns on the balls of her feet to glare at Hayden. “You shush, I’m not done.” Then her attention is back on me, and I wish it wasn’t. Callie is pissed. “If anybody can understand, then it’s me.”

“Callie...”

“No, don’t you dare Callie me, Nixon Cole!” This time when her finger stabs into my chest, her nail scrapes at my skin. “I know how it feels to lose somebody, and not just somebody, but a parent. I lost my parents when I was barely sixteen years old to an accident. I didn’t have time to prepare. I didn’t have time to tell them I loved them. They were here.” She snaps her fingers. “And then they were gone.”

Callie sniffles as tears fill her eyes.

“I’ll never forgive myself that the last words we spoke to each other were said in anger. So no, Nixon, you don’t get to pretend you’re all alone in this because you aren’t. And while your mom’s death is terrible and premature, you had time. You had time to be with her, you had time to show her how much you love her, you got to be by her side all the way, until the very end. I didn’t get any of those things.”

There is movement in the background. Hayden comes in, wrapping his arms around Callie and pulling her into his chest. This time, she doesn’t resist him.

“We got a lot, but we were robbed of so much more.”

“You were,” Callie agrees, sniffing softly. “But you’re the one who’s robbing yourself of even more with the way you’ve been acting. You only had to say the word and we’d have been by your side the whole way, helping you with whatever you needed, but instead you pushed us away. You still keep pushing us away. But that’s not even the worst part. What do you remember from last night? If you remember anything, that is.”

I gulp, trying to think of what might have happened to piss Callie off this much. My memory is hazy at best. Dad. Dad came to the house. We fought, and I threw him out. Fight with Jade. Coming to Blairwood. Drinking and then... nothing.

I rub at my face. “It’s all fuzzy.”

“You drank your body weight in alcohol, no wonder it’s all fuzzy. You had a bunch of people over, and you all got drunk off your asses. And when we asked you to stop and talk to us, you refused to do so. I called Yasmin, because I knew if you’d listen to anyone it’d be her.”

My heart skips a beat at the mention of her name. I haven’t seen her or

talked to her since she left with the rest of them back to Blairwood. Since I made her go.

It was for the best.

“Why did you call her? You know we...”

“Oh, I know that you acted like a dick and asked her to leave with the rest of us, but I also know that girl still loves you and wants what’s best for you. I thought you’d finally get your head out of your ass and realize you feel the same. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe you just needed somebody to be by your side for a while. Yasmin gave you everything, Nixon. She was with you when you were at your lowest, she was there to hold you when you were falling apart, she failed a fucking class for you! She didn’t deserve you to throw some hussy in her face and show her where the door is.”

Failed class? What is she...

The ringing in my ears intensifies. Callie keeps talking but all I can hear are those two words.

Failed class.

What? How?

“She gave you everything, and it wasn’t enough. I lost my family, Nixon, but coming here, finding Hayden, you, Chloe, Yasmin... it has given me a new family I didn’t even think I needed. You don’t hurt your family.”

“Callie, I’m so—”

“I don’t want your apologies, Nixon,” she snaps at me without giving me a chance to finish. “I want you to get your head straight and figure out what the hell you’re doing with your life and who do you want to have by your side.”

With another shake of her head, she turns around and leaves. I expect Hayden to follow, but he just leans against the wall.

The silence stretches between us. I sit in my wet bed, contemplating what was the moment that everything went to shit. I asked Yasmin to go just to help her avoid all this bullshit, but like with everything else I touch lately, I destroy it.

I destroyed her.

I run my hand through my wet hair. “I messed this up royally, didn’t I?”

“I think Callie referred to you as a major dickhead, so yeah.”

“Do you think she’ll ever forgive me?”

“Callie?” He sighs. “She just needs time. You hurt Yasmin, and she’s family to her.”

“I wanted to save her from this mess. I know how hard she worked to get where she is today. But she was already spending so much time with me, taking care of Jade and me.”

I close my eyes as the images of my last conversation with Jade flash in my mind, all the awful things we said.

I'll never forgive myself that the last words we spoke to each other were said in anger.

Two women. Two of the most important women in my life, and I managed to hurt them both in a matter of hours.

“I didn’t...” I let the question hang in the air, not sure what I want to know. “Nothing happened?”

“Apart from you getting so drunk you puked all over the downstairs bathroom and using some Karen chick as your buffer, nothing happened.”

“I didn’t...?”

“Kiss her?” he supplies. “Sleep with her? Nah, bro, you’re good. She wanted to, don’t get me wrong, but you couldn’t get her claws off yourself fast enough as soon as Yasmin was out of the room.”

I sigh as relief washes over me. At least there is that. I just have to convince her that I was a clueless asshole when I thought I could do this without her.

That I love her and hope that she takes me and all of my broken pieces back.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

YASMIN

“Grace?” I ask, my mouth hanging open in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Yasmin!” My friend crashes into me, wrapping me in her arms. “It’s so good to see you.”

I pull away, still not believing it, and look between my mom and Grace. “What? How?”

“Grace came to visit me that day you called all in tears. So, I said I’d come and see what’s going on here for myself, and she asked if she could tag along.”

“And since your mom was going, J.D. wasn’t a complete pain in my ass about letting me come.” Grace rolls her eyes, but her smile is even bigger if possible.

“Is there a time your brother isn’t a pain in the ass?” I joke, knowing damn well since I’ve met J.D. Shelton on a few occasions in the past. He’s this huge grizzly bear who’s super protective of his family and has an especially soft spot for his little sister and wife. I still remember the fuss he made when Grace went out on her first date.

“Shocking, isn’t it?” Grace loops her arm through mine. “So what’s this I’ve heard about you crying?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Then it’s good that we’re staying for the weekend. Now spill.”

“First coffee and some sweets,” Mom says decisively, looping her arm through mine. “Where can we find some delicious cheesecake?”

“I know just the place.”

“Well you sure were busy,” Grace comments, leaning into her chair and looking at me across the small table.

“Busy unintentionally destroying my life? Sure.”

I took them to Cup It Up, since there wasn’t a better place to get your coffee fix on and have something sweet before lunch. The place was busy, but when Monica saw me she managed to find us a small table out on the

terrace. Since the weather is finally getting warmer she decided to open it so she can accommodate more people. At least I think so, since I haven't been picking up as many shifts as I used to. I was actually surprised she didn't throw me out on my ass when she saw me.

"You didn't destroy your life, Yasmin. It's one class. So what? Everybody messes up every once in a while. It's not even that you messed up because you were partying, you were helping out a friend who needed it."

"I'd hoped that maybe if I managed to keep good grades I'd be able to qualify for a scholarship next year. Or if not, at least I'll graduate early if I continue with a full workload. I didn't want to depend on *him* more than necessary."

They know who the *him* I'm talking about is, so I don't have to explain it.

"You should have said something. You know J.D. would..."

"I love you Gracie, but no." I place my hand on hers before she can even finish. "I know if I'd said something last year, you'd have done the same. And I appreciate and love you for it, but I hate feeling like I owe people something."

"I'm not just somebody."

"You're my friend, it only makes it worse."

Grace sighs. "I want to say I don't understand, but I do."

We share a knowing look. I knew if anybody would be able to understand me it's her.

Grace didn't always come from money. She spent the first twelve years of her life living with her addict mother, until her half-brother finally found out about her and dug her out of the shithole that was her life.

Mom and I never had much, but we had each other. I had a roof over my head, food on my plate, and somebody who loved me. Grace didn't have any of those things.

"So yeah, now I don't know what will happen. My grades are down, so the scholarship is out of the question. I had a fight with Coach, and even if I didn't, I'm not sure I'd be able to go back. We don't have the money to pay for tuition. I guess I'll just have to take a year off or something to save some money and come back in the future."

That will suck, but not getting my degree is out of the question. I'm not going to disappoint Mom like this. I'm not going to disappoint *myself* like this.

So what if it'll take longer? It wouldn't be the first time I had to take a

harder route to get to my goal. And yeah, my friends will probably finish college by then, but that's a good thing. At least that way I won't have to see Nixon's stupid face and different girls hanging on his arm.

Yes, this will be a good thing. It doesn't matter that my heart hurts just at the thought of never seeing his stupid face again. I'll get over it. Somehow, some way, I will.

"Nonsense!" Mom says harshly, her fist pounding against the table and making it rattle. "You'll do no such..."

"María."

Every cell in my body tenses at the sound of his voice.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

We should have sat inside, but I wasn't thinking. I never, not once, saw him even close to the café, so what were the chances he'd come now?

I meet my mom's gaze and can see the recognition flash on her face. How will she react? From what I know, it's been years. Years since she saw the man who left her pregnant and never bothered to look back. This is what I was afraid of, them coming face to face after all this time. All because of me.

Slowly, I turn around to face him. "Coach," I say curtly, glaring at him.

"Jeremy," is Mom's only greeting. She sounds cool and composed, not even close to the mess I'm feeling inside.

"W-what are you doing here?"

He's clearly surprised, but I can't decipher if it's positive or negative. He knew I was here, so he should have known there was a chance Mom might come. He's been asking about her, no matter how many times I told him to stop and let it go.

"I came to visit my daughter at college." Mom lifts her chin a little bit higher. Seeing them stand so close together is unnerving. They're so different from one another, from the way they look to their backgrounds and who they are as people. How did they end up together?

I wrap my hand around mom's and tug. "Ven, vámonos."

"No, no te puedes ir," Coach says, his hand jolting forward but stopping himself before he touches us. His tone is pleading, his Spanish rusty. How did I not know he speaks Spanish? His throat bobs as he swallows. "Can we talk, María? Please?"

Mom watches him carefully before nodding once. "Take Grace for a walk, Yasmin."

"But, Mom, you can't..."

She turns toward me, eyebrows raised.

“You don’t have to do this. It’ll be okay.” I won’t have her beg him to clean up this mess I created. No way.

“No, I have to do this.” Mom gives me a reassuring smile, and a little push to get me going. “Go, I’ll be fine.”

“Fine,” I concede, but turn to Coach to give him a warning glare. “We won’t be far. Call if you need anything.”

“Todo va estar bien, mi niña,” she says, brushing her lips against my temple.

I can only hope she’s right.

With one final nod, Grace and I get up and leave Cup It Up. On the sidewalk across the street, I stop and look back. Coach’s mouth moves as he says something. Whatever it is, Mom nods, and then he takes the seat across from her.

“Ready to go?” I ask, my eyes still glued to the two of them. When there is no answer, I look over my shoulder. “Grace?”

“Huh?” She looks at me, her eyes wide.

I frown. “Are you okay?”

Grace looks a little pale. She throws a quick glance over her shoulder, as if searching for somebody, but then shakes her head. “Yeah, I’m fine, I just got lost in my thoughts. What were you saying?”

“How about a walk around the campus?”

“You’re going to leave them alone?”

“Oh, we’re going to stay close by.”

“You don’t trust him.” Grace nods.

“I don’t know him. And what I know I don’t particularly like.”

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. I wasn’t about to let another player break my heart. Not again.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

NIXON

Knowing there isn't much I can do, not just yet anyway, I decide to get my ass out of bed and take care of things that I can change. As soon as I inhaled some coffee and cleaned up the mess that I made, I sat in the car and drove back home, my fingers nervously tapping against the steering wheel as I fought all the possible scenarios I could find once I got there.

After one agonizingly long hour, I finally pulled into my driveway.

She's fine, I try to reassure myself as I get out of the car. *She's fine*.

Maybe if I repeat it enough times, it'll come true.

"Nixon!" Jade rushes out before I can even get to my feet. As soon as she's in arm's reach, she throws herself at me, knocking the air out of my lungs. "Don't you ever, ever, ever run off like that ever again."

"Ever?" I ask, chuckling. Tightening my grip on her, I sigh in relief.

Jade swats me over the back of my head. "Don't be an asshole."

"Don't be a brat."

Jade pulls back, her face turning serious. "I'm so sorry for all the things I said."

"Me too, Smalls."

"None of it was your fault. You did all that Mom asked of you. She wouldn't have wanted it any other way." Tears pool in her eyes.

"I know, but it doesn't mean I don't feel guilty. I should have been here more. Helped you out more. You shouldn't have had to deal with all of this on your own."

Jade shakes her head. "You were here as much as you could be, and she was happy. That's all that matters, after all. She died happy, and now she's in a better place."

"She is," I murmur, pulling her closer as she sniffles.

"I was so scared when you left yesterday." Her arms tighten around me. "Don't ever do it again. I mean it. I can't lose another person in my life."

"You're not losing me, Smalls. Not now, not ever."

"Promise?"

I kiss the top of her head. "Promise."

I'm not sure how long we stay out in the driveway, simply holding one another, but I'm not ready for this moment to end. Not just yet.

"I called him." Jade is first to break the quiet.

“Hmm?”

“Dad.” She clears her throat. “I called him after you left.”

My fingers clench into fists, but I do my best to hold my anger in check.

“He never picked up,” she says before I can ask. “I called him, and he didn’t answer.”

Fucking asshole.

“I’m so sorry, Smalls.”

“You’re not.” There is no menace in her words, just resignation. “But I can’t give up on him. Not yet. There is still hope, right? Maybe, someday.”

I’m not so sure about that, but I don’t want to disappoint her. “Maybe someday.”

“You can’t fail her,” I say as soon as I barge into the office first thing Monday morning. I barely got any sleep as I was trying to come up with a plan on how to make things right for Yasmin. I’d beg and plead, whatever was necessary, but she won’t be failing that class because of me.

“Mr. Cole, I’m so happy to finally see you.” Dr. Stevens sits down in her chair as if she’s used to students storming into her office unannounced and calmly takes a sip of her coffee.

“You can’t fail her,” I repeat in case she didn’t hear me.

Her face turns grim. She grabs a stack of papers and adjusts them. “I suppose you’re talking about Miss Hernandez.”

“Is there another student who’s failing your class?” As soon as I ask the question, I realize how stupid it sounds. A bunch of students fail every single semester.

Yasmin isn’t going to be one of them.

“You’d be surprised.” She tips her chin to the chair. “Sit.”

“I’d rather stand, thank you.”

“Sit,” she says, this time more sternly.

Holding back my protest, I plant my ass in the chair she indicated. I don’t want to piss her off. Not when I need her to make this right. I have to make this right, somehow, some way. Yasmin won’t lose everything she’s fought so hard to achieve because she put others in front of herself. Because she put *me* first. I’m the last person who deserves it.

“First of all, I’m so sorry about your loss.”

“Thank you, now can we please...”

I don’t want to talk to strangers about my loss. For most of them it’s just empty words that don’t mean shit to me.

“Secondly, there is nothing I can do about Miss Hernandez. She didn’t deliver the final essay on time. She missed classes. I’m sorry, because I really believe she’s a clever young lady with a lot of potential, but I can’t go out of my way. If I do it for her, I’ll have to do it for other people too. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise.”

“What about me? You gave me an extension,” I point out.

“I gave you an extension because you came to me and explained your circumstances early on. You delivered your essay by that extension period. You’ll still lose the points for missing classes though.”

I did reach out to my professors asking them for discretion since I knew things were bound to get worse at some point, and my place on the team depended on keeping up my GPA and attending classes. Most of them were more than accommodating.

“Then give her my extension,” I say instantly.

Dr. Stevens looks at me for a moment and then she shakes her head. “I’m sorry, it doesn’t work that way.”

“*Dammit*,” I mutter, my fingers clenching into a fist as the desperation sets in.

There has to be something I can do.

“You were saying?” she asks, the warning lift of her brows telling me that she heard me clear enough the first time and doesn’t care to have it repeated.

“Nothing, sorry.”

How can I make this right? There has to be a way, *has to*.

“If you don’t mind me saying, Miss Hernandez knew well enough about the requirements of the class. Whatever she was dealing with, she should have been more careful of her obligations. I’m positive that once she retakes the class next year, she’ll excel at it.”

That wasn’t even the question. Yasmin excels at everything, and this won’t be an exception. But it isn’t right. If anybody should have failed, it’s me, not her.

“I wish I could help you, I really do, but...”

I nod my head, getting to my feet.

“Thank you for your help.”

“If there is anything else I can help you with?”

I stop, facing her. “There is.”

Her brows arch higher, waiting.

“You can fail me too.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

YASMIN

“Do you really have to go?” I ask, my voice muffled in the crook of Mom’s shoulder.

She chuckles, patting me on the back. “You don’t really want me to stay.”

“I think I just said I did.”

“Well, you don’t mean it.”

I pull back, lifting my brows. “Now you can read my thoughts too?”

“No seas una sabelotodo, Yasmin.”

Smartass, my ass.

Okay, maybe she’s right. But in my defense, it was nice to have someone familiar with me, otherwise I’d have locked myself in my room and never come out, eaten my weight in sweets (okay, we did that one) and possibly drowned my sorrows in the bottle of tequila I still have stashed somewhere in my closet.

“What is taking Grace so long?”

I look around for a familiar black SUV—like J.D. would let Grace drive anything that’s not practically bulletproof—but come up empty. She said she’d go grab some coffee for the trip, but I knew she was just giving me and Mom some time to say goodbye in peace.

“The shop is probably busy.” Mom waves it off. “Are you finally planning to ask me?”

“Ask you what?”

“Don’t play dumb, Yasmin. We both know better.”

Sighing, I give in. After all, I’ve been wondering about it this whole weekend. “What happened with the coach?”

Mom’s face softens. “He’s your dad. It’s okay to call him that.”

“Dad is somebody who’s there when you need him. It’s a title that’s earned, not given freely. In the best case scenario he can be my sperm donor, although personally I think even that’s too generous.”

“Yasmin...”

“What?” I ask defensively. “It’s true.”

Mom shakes her head. “You always had a hard time forgiving.”

“I think it’s in my blood.”

“Fair enough.” Mom grabs my hands and gives them a tight squeeze. “We talked.”

“About what?”

They talked for hours. Grace and I stopped by Cup It Up twice, but when we realized they were still at it, we let them be. Well, Grace forced me to let them be. If you believe her words, twenty years and a child make for some pretty lengthy discussion.

“Everything. It takes two to fall in love, two to make a child...”

“Mom...” I groan. I so don’t need to see that picture in my head.

She rolls her eyes. “But it also takes two for things to fall apart. Was it Jeremy’s fault for taking the easy way out? Sure, but it was also my fault.”

“It’s not...”

“It is,” she interrupts. “I should have been more insistent, I should have asked him to come around more, to do something. Maybe it would have been better if you’d had a part-time dad instead of no dad at all. But I was young and foolish, believing that I knew what was best. That best ended up hurting you more than I realized, and I’m sorry for that.”

“No, Mom.” I shake my head. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about. You did the best you could, gave me everything I could ask for and more.”

“I could have done more. I could have made sure you had your father. I could have made sure he knew he was welcome if he wanted to be a part of our world, *your* world. And I didn’t. But all that is in the past, we can’t go back, but we can make a change moving forward, so we’ve come to an agreement.”

I frown, unsure of where this is going. “What kind of an agreement?”

“You’ll keep going to Blairwood in the fall...”

“Mom, no, I—”

She presses a finger to my lips to stop me from talking. “Escúchame. You’ll keep going to Blairwood in the fall. No discussion. Jeremy insisted he’ll pay your tuition one way or the other, so you might as well go.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “He can’t correct twenty years of not being there by throwing money at me.”

“No, he can’t, but you can’t deny that he’s trying.”

“I’m not having dinners with him, I—” I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“And you don’t have to.”

This gets my attention. I never doubted that he could pay my tuition and then some, but to give up our dinners? That I couldn’t believe. Not after forcing me to attend them for the better part of this year.

“I don’t?”

“No, but he will still be there, every Tuesday. Same time, same place. If and when you’re ready.”

I don’t have to go.

The relief at the knowledge is overwhelming, but it’s soon replaced by doubt. Is this his way to soothe his conscience? I’ll pay for the girl’s education, and all will be well in the world?

“Don’t think about it like that.”

“Reading my thoughts again, seriously Mom?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

“I don’t have to read your thoughts, they’re written all over your face,” she says, her face softening. Her hand reaches up, caressing my cheek. “It’ll be okay, mi niña, you’ll see. But please, think about it? Think about giving him a chance? Jeremy wants to get to know you. And knowing you, you were probably giving him a really hard time.”

I look away, guilty. Mom knows me too well for my own good.

“I might have been less than accommodating.”

“Or in the language of us mortals, she was being a cold-hearted bitch,” Grace sing-songs. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

I turn around and glare at my friend. “Thanks so much,” I mutter, grabbing one of the drinks from the holder.

“You’re welcome. I got you your favorite.”

I take a small sip, enjoying the familiar flavor. “The least you could do after insulting me.”

“I love you too.” Grace pulls me in for a hug. “I’m going to miss you.”

I lean into her embrace. “Just a few short months and then you’ll be here.”

“We’ll be here,” she corrects. “You and me, we had a deal, and I’m not letting you bail on me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I still don’t know what to think about all of this. Too many things have happened in such a short amount of time. Helen dying. Nixon telling me to leave. The fight with Coach. Failing a class. Nixon breaking it off. Mom and Grace coming. It’s all just too much. I need some time to think. To breathe.

“Come on you two, it’s time to go.”

I hug them both tightly before they enter the car. Lifting my hand in a wave, I watch as Grace pulls away, and they drive off, standing there until

they're not even a dot on the horizon.

Sighing, I look around. Mom and Grace are gone, and with them went my distraction.

Now what?

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

NIXON

Putting the car in park, I tilt my head back, scanning the windows on this side of the building. It's late afternoon, and dusk is beginning to fall so the lights are slowly turning on. Little rays of hope, illuminating the darkness.

Rubbing my palm over my face, I feel the tired finally start to set in, but there is no way I can go home and sleep.

Not without seeing her first.

I wanted to come earlier, the need to see her, to talk to her so profound it made my chest ache. But there were things I needed to take care of first.

Sighing, I open the door and get out. I cross the short distance to the dorm, climb the steps and enter. The hallway is buzzing with activity. Girls going to and fro, most of them giving me curious glances. Ignoring them, I go straight for the stairs and take two at a time until I get to the third floor, the destination as familiar as breathing.

As I move closer to the door I see light peeking from underneath the doorway. I knew that already. I know which one is her window, so I know she's here.

Will she want to talk to me? Or will she tell me to go the hell away?

Wiping my hands against my pants, I knock at the door and wait.

And wait.

Pressing my hands against the door, I lean forward. "Yasmin, I know you're in there," I say loudly enough that she can hear me on the other side of the door. "I can see the light is on."

I stop and listen. There is light rustling inside, but no answer.

"I know you can hear me. I'm probably the last person you want to talk to right now, but I'm not leaving before you listen to what I have to say."

More silence.

"A better man would probably listen to your wishes. A better man would take your silence for what it is, and let you go. But we both know I'm not that guy. And since you're on the other side of that door, and we're on the third floor, I think it's safe to assume that you won't be running away. I wanted to see you, to see your face, but I can say it like this if I have to though."

I inhale sharply, waiting, hoping, but there is nothing but quiet.

Here goes nothing.

"I know I acted like a complete asshole the other day. Well, more than

just the other day, if I'm being honest. It seems like I always say the wrong thing and end up hurting you. I wish I could give you an excuse, but the truth is, I don't have one, and even if I did, it would be just that—an excuse. You deserve better than excuses, Yasmin. You deserve a better guy than *me*. You deserve somebody who'll love you unconditionally and be as strong as you are. And I'm not that guy. I'm the one who takes until you have nothing left to give, the one who needs you so he can breathe. But dammit, I miss you. Because somewhere on the way you've become my reason to move forward, my light, my soul."

I let my head fall down against the door.

"I don't expect you to forgive me; hell, I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I need you to know that I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Yasmin. I'm sorry for being an ass. I'm sorry for saying those hurtful things the other day. I'm sorry that once again you risked everything, for me of all people. I don't deserve it. God knows I don't deserve it. I tried to make it right, I went to talk to Dr. Stevens to give you another chance. I know how much you've sacrificed so far, and I don't want to be the cause of you losing more but she didn't want to listen. Some bullshit about needing to be fair. How is it fair that one of the best students in the whole class is freaking failing? How? So I told her to screw it. If you're not getting a second chance I don't want mine either." I chuckle humorlessly. "Although honestly speaking, maybe that's my way of making sure that if you ditch my sorry ass now, I force you into seeing me next year too because I'm not giving up on you, on us."

Seriously, I thought Dr. Stevens would have an apoplexy or some shit when I told her. She tried to reason with me, but I didn't want to listen. I even went as far as threatening to break her laptop if she didn't delete my late email submission. If she didn't want to give Yasmin a second chance, I didn't want mine either.

"You did what?"

My whole body stiffens when I hear her voice, loud and clear and coming from... behind me?

Slowly I turn around and come face to face with Yasmin standing in the middle of the hallway. Her big dark eyes are looking at me as if I've gone mad, two bags hanging in her hands by her sides.

I blink, and then blink once again. But it's her. "What are you doing here?"

She was supposed to be in the room. The light...

The door opens behind me.

“Great, you’re here. Now I can finally go, so I don’t have to listen to his sappy ass any longer.” Callie shakes her head as she walks around me.

What the hell just happened?

YASMIN

What is he talking about?

If you're not getting a second chance I don't want mine either.

What second chance? What is going on? Why is he here?

My heart is galloping a hundred miles a minute, and it feels as if it'll burst out of my chest.

Callie comes to me, leaving the door to our room wide open. Grabbing one of the bags out of my hand, she gives me a quick hug.

"Give the guy a chance? He's been pouring out his soul to that stupid door for the past ten minutes."

"Why didn't you stop him?" I ask, turning to look at her. Maybe if I ignore Nixon he'll disappear, and I won't have to deal with all of this yet. Or ever.

Her blue eyes shine with mischief. "Oh, he deserves a little grief for what he did. Besides, it was fun."

"Pouring ice water over him wasn't enough?"

After Mom and Grace left, and I walked around mindlessly for a while, I decided to stop being a coward and called Callie. I asked her to meet me in the dorm, and when she came, I finally confessed everything. My reason for coming to Blairwood, who my father is, what happened with Nixon. Every. Single. Thing.

I expected her to be mad at me for keeping it a secret for so long, but as she pointed out, all things happen for a reason, you just have to wait long enough to figure it out.

"Not even close."

"I love you, Callie."

"Right back atcha, Yas." Callie pulls me in for another hug, her lips brushing against my ear. "Give him hell, but think about taking him back? He's like a lost puppy, making a mess of things, but deep down, he isn't a bad guy."

"I—" I lick my dry lips. "I'll think about it."

I wasn't sure I could take more heartbreak. And heartbreak is Nixon Cole's middle name.

"Good." She pulls back. "Call if you need me. I'll be back."

I nod, and watch her leave. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I turn back

and face him.

My darkness.

My heartbreak.

My love.

The man who stole my heart and then broke it into pieces.

Seeing him sober in the light of day is like a punch to my gut. My heart aches with the need for him to come and wrap me in his arms and tell me everything will be all right. But my heart is a sucker for punishment, and my brain is done with taking the punches.

A couple of girls come up the stairs, giggling obnoxiously loudly. They stop in their tracks when they see us, giving us curious glances. Well, giving Nixon curious glances. It's like I don't exist.

Clearing my throat, I wrap my arms around myself. "We can talk inside," I say, tipping my chin toward the room.

Nixon runs his finger through his hair. He looks tired, the bags under his eyes still as prominent as they were the day of his mom's funeral. He nods and goes inside, me following after him.

For some reason I want to leave the door open, but I shake my head at the silliness. The *click* as the door falls shut sounds almost ominous. I lean against the door and take one deep breath. "You were saying?"

Nixon looks around the room, but then his gaze finally finds mine. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough. But what I want to know is the part about you talking to Dr. Stevens."

"I shouldn't have said anything about that."

"Oh, you most definitely should have." I narrow my eyes at him. "What did you do, Nixon?"

"It doesn't matter. What's done is done."

"What did you do?" I repeat, this time slower.

"I told her I don't want her extension, you happy? If you're failing that class because you were helping me, then so help me God, I'm going to fail it too. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Nixon..."

"No, it doesn't matter. Nothing fucking matters, why can't you see this?"

He stalks toward me, his hand outstretched. I try to pull back but I'm already leaning against the door. There is nowhere to run. And I need to run. If I don't, if he touches me, I'm not sure what I'll do.

Nixon can see my unease, because he stops when we're toe to toe. I can feel his body heat enveloping me from all sides. So close I can touch him, but so far away. Always out of my reach.

"You don't mean it," I whisper.

"I mean it, Yasmin." His eyes roam over my face, taking in every inch as if he can't get enough of me. "I missed you, since the moment you left, I missed you, and I wanted to call you and ask you to come back."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I knew you deserved better. You deserve a better man."

"I never wanted a better man, I wanted you."

"And I tried to save you from the train wreck that's my life, but as it turns out, even in that, I was too late."

"I didn't need you to save me, I needed you to be with me. I need you to l
—"

I bite my tongue, stopping the word from coming out. I won't beg another man to love me. Never again.

Tears gather in my eyes, so I close them. I can feel them burn behind my closed eyelids. One slips away and falls down my cheek.

"Don't cry," he whispers, his thumb brushing against my cheek. "I never wanted to make you cry."

Opening my eyes, I tilt my head back to look at him. "A little late for that, don't you think?"

"If I could turn back time, I would have made some different choices."

"But there is no turning back time, now is there?" I ask sadly.

"No there isn't, that's why the only thing I can offer you is a better today, a better tomorrow. Because no matter how hard it may seem, I do love you, Yasmin. I started falling for you that first moment you lashed that tongue of yours at me and haven't stopped since."

I do love you. His words echo in my mind, making my heart squeeze painfully.

I shake my head. "I'm not sure I can keep doing this."

"Then I'll have to keep working hard to show you that you can. You can trust me. You can love me. I'm not going anywhere."

"But that's the thing, you asked me to stay, and then you told me to let go. I'm done playing games, I'm done with being second best, I'm done waiting for somebody to love me back."

Now I'm full-on crying, and I hate crying, but there is no way to stop this

onslaught of emotions that's going through me.

"No more waiting, Yas. This time I'm here to stay. This time I'll wait until you're ready to finally let me in again. It doesn't matter how long because I love you, I need you, and I'm prepared to wait because you're worth it. You're worth everything."

Lifting on the tips of my toes, I press my mouth against his. It's hard and desperate, but he doesn't complain. My fingers dig into his hair, pulling him closer. His mouth opens, and I slide my tongue inside, needing more.

"Yas," he gasps, but I swallow it with another kiss.

Nixon's arms wrap around me, lifting me up against the door so we're at the same level. I wrap my legs around his middle, bringing him closer to me, as our kiss deepens.

"I missed you," I breathe between the kisses. "So damn much."

"Me too, baby."

Tugging at his hair, I pull him back. We're both panting, our heated breaths mingling together. "I hate you for what you did."

Pain flashes behind his stormy eyes. "I hate myself more. So much more."

"My brain tells me not to trust you, but my heart..." I swallow, my tongue darting out to wet my dry lips. "My heart wants you to stay."

"I'm not going anywhere." His hands tighten around me. "This time, I'm here to stay."

Nixon leans his forehead against mine. "Let me show you. Let me show you I'm here to stay."

I brush my fingers against his cheek. "Show me."

So he does.

With his kisses.

With his every touch.

With his body.

This time it's not about forgetting, this time it's about finding ourselves, and that's exactly what we do.

EPILOGUE

YASMIN

TWO WEEKS LATER

“Yasmin?”

“Huh?”

Nixon chuckles. “Where’s your mind at?”

I shake my head to clear my mind. “I’m sorry.” I offer him an apologetic smile. “I spaced out.”

He leans against his hand that’s propped on his mattress. We’re each sitting on the floor on either side of his king-sized bed. It was the only way we could prevent our hands from wandering while we had to study.

“You worrying about finals?”

“Not really.” Nixon gives me a doubtful look. “Okay, a little, but that’s not what’s on my mind.”

“Then what is on your mind?”

“It’s Tuesday.”

Nixon opens his mouth, his lips forming a little O as the realization settles in. “Dinner night.”

“Dinner night,” I confirm, turning the page. Maybe he’ll get the memo and leave this subject be.

“Have you talked to him at all?”

Or maybe not.

Sighing, I let the book fall shut and put it down. Apparently there was no avoiding this conversation. “What for?”

Nixon and I never talk much about the coach or my relationship with him. Not even just after he found out about it. The knowledge was always there, but we ignored it. Until now.

“I don’t know,” he sighs. “To get closure?”

“Like you talked to your dad?” I know it’s a low blow, but the words are out before I can stop them.

I don’t expect him to answer, and I’m about to apologize when he surprises me. “No, I haven’t. Not since the reading of the will. And I don’t think I’m going to.”

Leaning over the mattress, I put my hand over his. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

The relationship between Nixon and his dad is a sore subject on the best of days, and bringing it up was totally unnecessary.

"Maybe, but it doesn't make it less true."

"We make quite a pair, don't we?"

"In more ways than one." Nixon swipes his thumb over my palm. "I thought about it, talking to him, but I can't do it. Not right now, maybe not ever. It's like all he ever taught me was a lie. The man I knew, the man I believed him to be, doesn't exist. I can understand that he was hurting too, but so were we, and we stayed."

"Coach left too."

"Before you were born."

"You think that makes it easier?"

"What I think is that he's been trying. Maybe you should give him a second chance." Nixon lifts my hand and presses his mouth against the inside of my wrist. A shiver runs through my body at his touch. There is no hiding how he affects me. "You gave me a second chance, and we both know I didn't deserve it. You have a big heart, are you sure there isn't just a little bit of space left for him?"

"Mom said he'll be waiting for the day I'm ready." I nibble at my lip, unsure of what to do. That thought has been on my mind since she said it, and for whatever reason I couldn't seem to let it go. "Same place, same time. But what if he isn't there? What if I go, and he disappoints me once again?"

What if he breaks my heart once again?

Nixon cups my cheek. "Then I'll be there to help you heal."

"I'd be happier if you'd break his nose instead. A lot messier and more satisfying."

He chuckles. "Deal."

I switch my weight from one leg to the other as the doorbell echoes inside the house. My palms are so sweaty I have to rub them against my legs.

It's going to be okay. It's just dinner.

If he's even here.

I look over my shoulder at Nixon's car parked against the curb. He's watching me, and I have this sudden urge to go back to him and demand we leave right this instant.

Breathe, he mouths.

I nod, sucking in some much-needed air.

I almost miss the sound of footsteps approaching with the buzzing in my ears. The door swings open, and Coach appears on the other side.

"Yasmin?" He looks at me and then over my shoulder before returning his gaze to me. "What are you doing here?"

"I came for dinner."

"Dinner?"

"You said you'd be here. Same place, same time."

Did he change his mind? DÍos, this is so mortifying.

"I did." He nods, but doesn't attempt to move.

"Well, I'm here."

Hello, Captain Obvious.

"For dinner?"

"Dinner," I nod, then quickly add, "Not talking."

Dinner I can do, but I can't deal with another one of our forced conversations.

"Okay, we can have dinner then." He takes a step back, letting me inside. "Come on in."

Slowly, I enter the house. It's not the first time I've been at his house, but with how wary I am, you'd think it is. I'm not sure what I expect to find—or not find—but everything looks normal. Like it usually does.

In silence, we walk to the kitchen. I can feel his presence behind me, looming over me.

When I come to the kitchen doorway, I stop in my tracks.

The table is set for two, as usual. Only one plate is filled with food.

"I'd have waited if I knew you were coming," he says from right behind me, sounding almost apologetic.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I croak out, "I-it's fine."

And this time I really mean it.

Looking over my shoulder, I face him. "It's fine."

Coach smiles. I don't think I've ever seen him smile before. It makes him look... softer, I guess. He nods his head toward the table. "Dinner, no talk," he promises.

Maybe, just maybe, there is still hope for us.

“How did it go?” Nixon asks as soon as I open the door and slide inside the car.

“It was...” I stop, leaning my head against the headrest to gather my thoughts. “Okay. Quiet, but okay.”

“That’s good, right?”

Nixon smiles, a dimple popping in his cheek. He’s been doing that a little more lately. And every time I see it, I give myself a second to cherish the moment.

“He was there, waiting,” I say, still dumbfounded.

I was preparing myself for disappointment that never came, and now I don’t know what to do with myself.

Nixon cups my face, his thumb sliding over my cheek. “That’s because you, Yasmin Hernandez, are worth waiting for, worth staying for.”

I lean forward, pressing my lips against his. “I love you, Nixon.”

A smile flashes across his face, as it always does when I say those four words. “I love you too.”

Not ready to say goodbye to Nixon and Yasmin?
[Click here to grab Kiss To Forget bonus epilogue!](#)

I’d love to hear what you thought of Kiss To Forget! If you have a moment, please consider leaving a short review.

Want to know more about younger Yasmin and Grace? Check out Grace’s short story Kiss Before Midnight. It’s live for a limited time as a part of [Mistletoe Kisses anthology](#).

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Did you enjoy Kiss To Forget?
Turn the page and take a peek into Lines, my YA sports romance!

CHAPTER 1

AMELIA

“Stone Cold” is playing on the radio as I drive my Volkswagen Golf to the school. The car may be old, but it’s reliable. Kind of. Maybe I heard some strange noises coming out of it a time or two. But it’s something normal, right? Strange noises coming out of old things give them charm, give them character. People say it all the time.

Anyway, the car is mine, and that’s all that matters to me. The last three summers I was working my butt off helping my aunt in her hair salon and saving money so I could buy myself a car.

It’s the first day of school and the first day of my senior year. The beginning of the end. I’m one step closer to freedom, one step closer to getting out of hell and starting a new life—life away from this city and its people.

The phone on the console in front of me starts ringing. Lowering the music, I give a quick look at the screen before connecting the call and putting it on speaker.

“Where are you, Lia?” My best friend’s voice comes from the speaker.

“On my way to school, Brooks. Where would I be?”

“You’re late.” I can hear the noises around her, meaning she’s already there. I roll my eyes at her accusatory tone. “I was worried,” she adds, this time a little softer.

“No need to be. I simply overslept,” I reassure her, feeling slightly guilty. Brook is my best friend, always there for me and standing by my side, even when things aren’t pretty. How many people do that? She knows how difficult it is for me to return to school each fall, so of course she’s worried. “I should be there in time for homeroom. Save me a seat, will ya?”

It’s not like somebody is going to take the front row seats anyway. Most of the time, the two of us are invisible. *Most* being the keyword.

Some strange noises start coming from my car, and a light on the console turns red. “Ohh shit!” I groan loudly. “Not now.”

“What’s going on?” She sounds worried. “Why are you yelling?”

“Something’s wrong with the car. I have to pull over. I’ll see you later in class, okay?”

“Later.”

She hangs up, and I pull over to the side of the road. Not knowing what I

should do, I simply stay in my seat. Looking in front of me, my hands grip the steering wheel tightly, turning my knuckles whiter than they already are.

“You can do it, Lia,” I murmur to myself as I take one deep breath and open the car door. “You can do it.”

Going to the front of the car, I lift the hood and look inside. All those wires and tubes and... whatever. Blackness and dirt, that’s all I understand about it. How the hell should I know what’s wrong with this thing?

I bite into my lower lip to stop it from wobbling. I’m already tired and frustrated from my dream and from oversleeping. The last thing I need today is to be late for class or to have a mental breakdown—and here I am on my way to both.

Taking the phone out of my pocket, I try dialing my dad, but it goes straight to voicemail. “Just fucking perfect,” I swear under my breath. After the beep, I explain to him what happened and where my car is.

If I start walking now and hurry, I’ll be late for class by just a few minutes.

I’m about to close the hood when I hear the sound of a bike nearing. It’s some kind of fancy, sleek, black bike. It starts slowing down, only to stop next to my car.

The driver’s also dressed in all black—black helmet and leather jacket, black jeans and biker boots. He takes off the helmet and holds it against his side while he runs his right hand through messy strands of dark brown hair.

He’s handsome, so handsome he looks like someone who should be on the cover of a magazine.

“Need help?”

His voice is smooth, easy-going. He gives me a crooked smile, and his almond-shaped, gray eyes have a hint of teasing light in them.

“If you know how to get this thing going.” I shrug, pointing with a thumb over my shoulder at my good-for-nothing car. I’m not usually so careless to talk to or accept help from a complete stranger, no matter how hot they are, but I don’t have much choice right now. Not if I want to get to school on time and not draw attention to myself on the first day of classes.

“Let’s see. What happened exactly?”

He gets off the bike in one smooth motion, like he’s done it a hundred times before. He probably has. I tell him about the strange sounds and the light going on as he gets under the hood.

I look at him while he works.

He's around my age, but could be older. It's hard to guess because he has this whole older, bad-boy vibe going on, and I've never seen him around school or town. I would know; everybody knows everybody around here, all the way back to diapers.

Add to it that he looks a little bit dangerous. Everything about him screams beware, bad boy, trouble—all dark and mysterious, giving sexy half smiles and trading fingers through hair. And is that a tattoo peeking through the sleeve of his shirt?

He turns around, startling me. "It's definitely the oil." Gray eyes narrow, looking at me. "Were you just staring at my butt?"

"What?" A shriek leaves my lips. "I did no such thing!"

His smile grows even wider, confidence oozing from every pore of his body. "You so were." He leans into the car. "But it's okay. Good to know all the workouts pay off."

He winks at me playfully, and I can feel my cheeks getting hot with embarrassment. What did I do to deserve this kind of day? And it's just beginning! "So can you do something or not?"

"If you have extra oil in your trunk, then yeah I can do something."

I bite into my lower lip, uncomfortably switching from one foot to the other.

"I guess you don't." The tone of his voice clearly states what he thinks but is too polite to voice—typical girl behavior.

"Well, I called my dad. He'll come later and take care of it," I sigh, going to the backseat to get my backpack. Walking it is. Is there anything else that can happen to ruin this day even more than it already is? "Thank you for stopping to help and wasting your time, but I should really go. I'm already late for school."

"You go to Greyford High?"

Throwing my backpack over my right shoulder, I close the door and turn to look at him, but he isn't where I left him at the hood of the car. No, he's right there behind me.

This close, I have a good look at his face.

He's handsome, his facial features movie-worthy. Strong jaw hidden behind light stubble; straight, white teeth; his lower lip slightly fuller. His nose is straight, no bumps or any imperfections, and his gray eyes stand out even more against his dark, prominent eyebrows and olive skin. Also, he's tall, over six feet and even behind his clothes, I can see he's well build.

“Why?” I ask carefully.

“Are you afraid?” he teases. The back of his finger is caressing my cheek, and I feel my body tense, then shudder slightly from his touch. What is he doing to me? How is it that this guy that I just met has this kind of power over my body? “If I wanted to kidnap you, I would have already done it.”

“Then?”

“I’m going there myself.” He shrugs like it’s evident or something. His finger falls from my cheek as he takes a step back. “I just moved here, so it’s my first day. It’s your call, Freckles.”

I watch him go back to the bike. I could easily take his offer and maybe get to school on time. Or I could refuse him and walk twenty minutes with a backpack full of books over my shoulder.

“I don’t know you,” I say, hoping to convince, I don’t even know who really, that this is not a good idea.

This is the first time I’ve seen the guy. Yeah, he’s polite and helpful. Kind of like a knight in shining armor—or knight on a sleek bike—but I learned a long time ago that knights are just a myth, and if you want to survive, you’ll have to do it on your own.

“Max Sanders.” He offers me his hand, and I take it in mine. It’s big and warm, enveloping mine completely.

“Amelia Campbell.”

“So, Freckles, which is it? Bike or walking?” Max is still holding my hand as he asks the question.

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I ask, trying to contain the small shudder that goes through my body. That name reminds me too much of another not-so-cute pet name I’ve got. I look him in the eyes, hoping to find something, anything actually, that will tell me what he’s thinking.

“You have them all over your nose and cheeks.”

“It’s hard not to notice when you’ve looked at this face every day for 17 years.” My tone is sarcastic, but he ignores me.

“They’re cute.” He gives me yet another shrug and a half-smile. “So?”

Taking one deep, shaky breath, I put backpack over both of my shoulders. “How good are you at driving this thing?”

“The best,” he replies with a big, goofy smile. “Hop on.”

I’m so going to regret this.

“So...” Nervously, I look from behind Max.

People started staring from the moment we entered school property. Not hallways. Parking lot.

It was like a scene from one of those chick flicks I make Brook watch with me where everybody turns around and stares at the hot new guy or girl, and then they turn around and start to gossip.

It’s insane and makes me jittery. No one ever pays attention to me, except when Derek and Andrew are around, then they do. Pay attention that is, watching from the side and smirking like they know something, when in reality they know nothing. Some also enjoy getting in my way. Apparently, I’m too close to them, so their foot finds a way in front of my legs, making me trip, or their shoulder pushes against mine as I walk by in the hallways. As I said, I’m in their way.

Why were they even still in the hallways? The bell is about to ring any second now.

“Thanks again for the ride.” I try smiling, but it feels forced, even to myself. Max turns around and looks at me with his brows raised. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

I try to pass around him, but he catches my hand and makes me stop. “Not so fast. What do you have first period?”

“Homeroom, Mrs. Rayan.”

“Great, me too.” He gives me a wide smile, one filled with mischief. This guy was born up to no good. “You can pay me back for saving your ass this morning by showing me how to get there. My personal guide for the day. What do you say, Freckles?”

We look at each other. It feels like an eternity, but I know it’s a matter of seconds. Every time he calls me that my stomach begins tumbling and a sour taste erupts in my mouth. I lick my suddenly dry lips before answering. “Okay,” I agree. “But you have to stop calling me that.”

His smile falls. “Why would I do that?”

“I...” I bite into my lower lip, almost making it bleed, and slowly shake my head. “Just don’t.”

Insightful, gray eyes look at me for a few long seconds before he finally nods his head, even if reluctantly, in agreement. “What do I call you then?”

“Lia. My friend calls me Lia.”

The bell starts ringing loudly, startling me. People around us break from whatever spell they were under and hurry to their own classes, although I see

a few curious faces giving us a backward glance.

“This, Lia, is your clue to start leading the way.” He throws his hand around my shoulders, tugging me into his side. He towers over me, and I can feel the heat radiating off his body. Masculine scent surrounds me. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I want to burrow my nose in his neck and inhale him in. But I don’t because it would be extra creepy. “I didn’t break a few laws so that you’d end up late for class.”

A giggle escapes my lips. It’s soft, almost inaudible. I don’t know who is more surprised to hear it—me or Max.

“Come on. It’s this way.”

I walk, thinking he’ll move his hand off my shoulders and follow me, but he surprises me, as he did from the moment I met him. His hand stays firmly in place as he follows next to me, taking smaller steps to accommodate my pace.

I don’t know what to make of him. One moment he’s teasing me like he enjoys mocking me and seeing me blush, but in other situations, he’s really nice and considerate.

“We’re here,” I say, stopping in front of homeroom.

Mrs. Rayan’s voice is calling names from the other side of the door, a door that leads to a classroom full of students who will turn around and stare when I open it.

Max is standing behind me, his hand on the doorknob. “Come on. It’s nothing serious,” he assures me, his relaxed and composed voice calming my rapidly beating heart. “Everyone’s late every once in a while.”

He turns the knob and softly pushes me inside. Everyone turns around just as I knew they would, looking at me, looking at us standing at the door.

“Miss Campbell.” Mrs. Rayan voice is impassive. “I’m glad you could join us. Go in and take your seat.”

[Grab your copy of Lines!](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm not sure how this happens, but I always forget about this part of the book, then I'm formatting and the lightbulb turns on. Oh well, better late than never, right?

It's not a secret that I don't usually cry while writing my books, but this one brought me to my knees more than once. You'd think it wouldn't affect me after the first time. Well, you'd be wrong. Writing, rewriting and editing this story was like seeing a train wreck, knowing it's coming but being unable to stop it. I've lost count of the number of times I've turned into a sobbing mess while working on *Kiss To Forget*. I've written many stories so far, some of them angstier than others, but this one cut deep.

As many of my stories, this one was inspired by a song. I remember hearing it for the first time and knowing one day I'd write a story based on it.

I knew what would happen before I wrote the first word. I knew things Nixon is dealing with and I knew it'll be hard to go through it, but life is hard. Life is unfair. And it throws you a curveball when you least expect it. Bad things happen to good people every day, it's not fair, but it's life and that's why I believe you have to live it to the fullest, enjoying every single moment like it might be your last.

My heart still aches for these three (yes, I'm counting Jade too!), and I can only hope I did their story justice.

As for thank yous... A special shoutout to my betas team. I know I say it always, but you girls are what's keeping me sane when everything stops making sense. Thank you so much for your patience and love for my words.

Thank you to my behind-the-scenes team for helping me bring the best version possible of my stories out into the world.

And thank you, my readers, for coming back for more of my words and for loving my characters the way you do!

Please, if you have a moment, consider leaving a short review for *Kiss To Forget*. Reviews help other readers and authors.

Until the next book.

Love,

Anna

PLAYLIST

The Weekend - Shameless (Sofia Karlberg cover)
We Three - Heaven's Not Too Far
We Three - Lifeline
Kelly Clarkson - Piece by Piece
Camila Cabello and Shawn Mendes - Senorita
Selena Gomez - She
Faouzia - Tears Of Gold
Faouzia - Wake Me When It's Over
Faouzia - How It All Works Out
Ruelle feat. Fleurie - Carry You
JoJo - Too Little Too Late
Chris Young - Drowning
Fleurie - Breathe
Welshly Arms - Sanctuary
Rihanna feat. Mikky Ekko - Stay
Beyoncé - I Was Here
Shawn Mendes - Fallin' For You
UNSECRET feat. Ruelle - Hang On A Little Longer

OTHER BOOKS BY ANNA B. DOE

New York Knights Series

NA/adult sports romance

#1 [Lost & Found](#)

#2 [Until](#)

#3 [Forever](#)

Greyford High Series

YA/NA sports romance

#1 [Lines](#)

#2 [Habits](#)

#3 [Rules](#)

#4 [The Penalty Box](#)

#5 [The Stand-In Boyfriend](#)

#6 The Hotshot Player (coming 2021)

#7 The Safety Net (coming 2021)

Blairwood University Series

College sports romance

#1 [Kiss To Conquer](#)

#2 [Kiss To Forget](#)

#3 Kiss To... (Zane's story, coming 2021)

Standalone novels

[Underwater: Modern Fairytale](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna B. Doe is a young adult and new adult contemporary romance author. She writes real-life romance that is equal parts sweet and sexy. She's a coffee and chocolate addict. Like her characters, she loves those two things dark, sweet and with little extra spice.

When she's not working for a living or writing her newest book you can find her reading books or binge-watching TV shows. Originally from Croatia, she is always planning her next trip because wanderlust is in her blood.

She is currently working on various projects. Some more secret than others.

Find more about Anna on her website: www.annabdoe.com

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