



**LOSE  
YOU  
TO  
FIND  
ME**

CALEB AND RAINE

LINDON U

**B. CELESTE**

# LOSE YOU TO FIND ME

B. Celeste

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## ALSO BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)  
[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)  
[The Truth about Us](#)  
[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)  
[Where the Little Birds Go](#)  
[Where the Little Birds Are](#)  
[Into the Clear Water](#)  
[Color Me Pretty](#)  
[Tell Me When It's Over](#)  
[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)  
[Dare You to Hate Me](#)  
[Beg You to Trust Me](#)  
[Make You Miss Me](#)  
[When It Rains](#)  
[Wanted You More](#)  
[Girl Going Nowhere](#)

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*For my friends, who listen to me talk about the books I'm either read  
writing twenty-four-seven because I have no other life*



*For my friends, who listen to me talk about the books I'm either reading or writing twenty-four-seven because I have no other life*

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# PLAYLIST

- “Lose You to Love Me”—Selena Gomez
- “Wish You’d Miss Me”—Chase Wright
- “Flowers”—Lauren Spencer-Smith
- “Better Off Without Me”—Kyle Hume
- “Afterglow”—Taylor Swift
- “Breath”—Breaking Benjamin
- “Take Back Home Girl”—Chris Lane ft. Tori Kelly
- “Hold Me While You Wait”—Lewis Capaldi
- “Marry Me”—Thomas Rhett
- “From the Ground Up”—Dan + Shay

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## Prologue

# RAINE

THE UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL field looks different set up for the graduation ceremony. Instead of the bleachers being full of fans sporting Lindon's red team colors, it's a crowd of people in formal wear supporting their own ones, spread in rows of folding chairs across the turf.

A pressure builds in the pit of my stomach when I hear *Raine Copelin* announced through the microphone. On wobbly legs, I look at the crowd and see a blur of faces cheering me on. Mom and Dad are there with each other with big smiles on their faces despite the divorce drama I've been going through for the past few months, and Mom's sister, Aunt Tami, is perched on her other side, holding up her phone to take a billion pictures that she'll undoubtedly tag me in later.

Skin tightening as I shake the long line of hands before accepting my diploma, I turn to face the front of the stage and roll my shoulders. I stand taller. There's a warm buzz creeping along my skin as I hear the crowd in particular cheering me on louder than anybody.

From the corner of my eye, I see Caleb Anders clapping the loudest along with half the school's football team cheering right alongside him.

Normally, the former running back whistling at me is the one everyone has their eyes on when he's standing on this field. There isn't one game that I missed during the season. I'd sit beside every other fan watching the Dragons take on their opponents, feeling the anxiety of every chase, every yard, and touchdown that came with the intense game.

I keep reminding myself that this very moment has been one I've been dreaming of for years. The start of something new—a big future with *Copelin* printed on an office door in bold lettering to a practice that is now mine.

But I know the future is murky when it comes to other people's plans for me.

Namely, Caleb's.

My ears ring when the ceremony ends and everybody tosses the confetti into the air. I barely register callused hands pulling me to the side while the class disperses with a newfound freedom tied to four years of steep delirium.

Caleb wraps me in a big hug, which I instantly return despite the *thump, thump* of my pounding heart. Can he feel it drumming against my chest? When he pulls back, there's a glossy look to his eyes that sounds like alarm bells.

Because I know that the future Caleb wants is about to be thrown in my face in front of all these people.

A future I can't give him.

My stomach drops at the same moment as he does onto one knee. A collective gasp comes from the people around us as they watch the scene unfold.

The panic seeps in as he looks up at me with those warm chocolate eyes that have always made me feel so loved and taken care of.

When he pulls out a small black velvet box, I know exactly what's inside before he even opens it to reveal the beautiful white-gold ring sitting in the holder. The sun hits the small diamond, making it shimmer like the light on Caleb's face as he asks me those four words.

"Will you marry me?"

The ringing in my ears intensifies, drowning out the crowd waiting for my response. My eyes lift to graze the eager bystanders and lock with Tiffany's stricken faces, then Dad's blank one as he stares at the man who's been my boyfriend of seven years is holding.

*Thump, thump, thump, thump.*

When I finally look back down at the twenty-two-year-old with a smile, I know without a single doubt in my mind that I love him. I've loved him for a long time—long before he gave me that little stuffed polar bear holding a heart that had *I love you* stitched into it.

It was our thing. *His* thing. When the verbal words were too much for me, he'd gift them to me, and I'd felt them all the same.

*I love you.*

*Be mine.*

*Happily ever after.*

I'd fallen in love with his wit and how much he cared for his family.



boy kneeling in front of me with wavering lips as he awaits my answer. My family man to his core. He's going to take over the hardware store in my hometown, his father's legacy his father has built for many generations to come.

Which is the problem.

Legacies like that will leave a mark on the world along with my expectations that I can't live up to.

But Caleb can't know about the reason why.

Because then he'd know the truth about what happened that summer in 2015.

Inhaling deeply, I let out an unstable breath and slowly start shaking my head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Caleb."

No matter what, I'm going to break his heart. Whether it's now or years into the future.

With a glassy gaze that I fight, I stare down at the gorgeous ring that I want so badly to be wearing on my finger right now.

Despite the crack that becomes bigger and bigger in my own mind, I whisper, "I can't."

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boy kneeling in front of me with wavering lips as he awaits my answer is a family man to his core. He's going to take over the hardware store in Lindon, a legacy his father has built for many generations to come.

Which is the problem.

Legacies like that will leave a mark on the world along with huge expectations that I can't live up to.

But Caleb can't know about the reason why.

Because then he'd know the truth about what happened that summer back in 2015.

Inhaling deeply, I let out an unstable breath and slowly start shaking my head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Caleb."

No matter what, I'm going to break his heart. Whether it's now or ten years into the future.

With a glassy gaze that I fight, I stare down at the gorgeous ring that I want so badly to be wearing on my finger right now.

Despite the crack that becomes bigger and bigger in my own heart, I whisper, "I can't."

## Chapter One

# CALEB

LINGERING EYES WATCH me as I walk down the narrow hallway dimly lit by fluorescent lights. One of the rectangular fixtures flickers, making me twitch until I force it still and ease my tense facial features. I'm exhausted, but I'm not showing it. Tired of saving face and trying to act like my world isn't about to collapse around me.

It's day four in the new unit.

Same group of overworked nurses.

Same grumpy, elderly oncologist.

Same distraught, teary-eyed mother.

Consoling her has been nearly impossible, but it doesn't stop me from trying. If there's anybody who deserves to be bitter with the world right now, it's Denise Anders. After thirty-six years of marriage, she's going to say goodbye to the man she's considered her soulmate from the day they met.

I can't even pretend I understand what it feels like to lose the love of your life, because I'm not sure the girl I thought was mine ever was. Not as easily as she gave us up.

*I'm so sorry, Caleb. I can't.*

Three months later, and those words still haunt me. You'd think after nearly a decade together I would have known what to expect from Denise. Specifically, the three-letter word to the question I'd been wanting to ask her for a long-ass time. *Y-E-S*.

Turns out I didn't know shit about the freckle-faced redhead.

"They know," Mom says under her breath, peeling me away from my pitiful thoughts. She muffles her soft snuffle with the tissue I passed her when we entered through the sliding doors of the hospital. Her eyes go to the nurses as we pass by them. Sad, sympathetic smiles flash in our direction, adding to the anger festering inside me.

I want to rip those smiles off their faces. Every single one. "The

know anything,” I tell her as she blots her reddened, puffy eyes. They same color brown as mine, but the tears have made them darker than resting under them. “Miracles have happened before.”

Do I believe it’ll happen here? No. Dad’s brain cancer was diagnosed late and spread too quickly. A week and a half ago, we were told by the oncologist that all they could do is make him as comfortable as possible at this point.

The door is ajar when we approach it, and I see the same pretty boy lit by my eye, Emma, on morning rotation taking his vitals. He’s awake and talking with a tired smile on his face that somehow still manages to meet his eyes, especially when he turns to see Mom and me enter the room.

“You’re here,” he greets in a hoarse voice. He coughs into the handkerchief. He isn’t hooked up to tubes and wires, shooting an apologetic look to the raven-haired girl documenting his vital signs on the computer.

Mom instantly walks over, pecking Dad’s temple before brushing her hand through the stubble of hair growing back from where they never shave his head for surgery. It came back whiter than ever. Dad said that when he grows out a beard, he could play Santa in the town’s next Christmas pageant.

What none of us bothered to say was that we aren’t sure he’ll make it long. I think he knows that too, but that’s Dad. Always making plans. Always optimistic.

“Hey, old man.” I walk over and clasp his hand, not squeezing nearly as hard as I want to. He returns the gesture, his strength not even a third of what it used to be. The man who would always amaze me as a child for being able to loosen rusty bolts, rebuild car engines, and spend hours in the garage helping Great-Uncle Joe with hay season on his farm now amazes me with something completely different.

For simply *being here* and fighting.

That’s all he’s done since they found the tumor on his head scan.

Dad looks between Mom and me. “Did you eat something before you came? The food here is awful, but sometimes Emma”—he shoots his eyes at me with a playful wink—“sneaks in snacks and leftovers from the break room.”

My eyes go to the girl in question, but she won’t meet my eyes. Instead, Emma focuses on finishing up what she came here to do before rolling the computer into the corner. “You’re all set, Mr. Anders. I’ll check in with you later.”

you're the Mom doesn't notice the small wave she offers them, but I do. I look at the other parents for a moment, who are already lost in murmured conversation, and I slip out the door after her.

used too "Wait up," I call out, jogging over to where Emma has stopped. She's fidgeting with the badge clipped to the breast pocket of her pink scrubs. "Hey," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "Look, I'm sorry about the other night. I got pretty swamped at the store, and by the time I came to work as a nurse, I was exhausted."

to her, a Her gray eyes go behind her to the nurse's station, where a few other nurses around our age are standing and watching us. They start whispering, and Emma turns back to me, looking a little nervous. She lifts her shoulder nonchalantly, but I can tell I must have hurt her feelings for not texting her. "It's okay, Caleb."

I bend down and press a kiss against one cheek, watching both of them. Her color subtly like they always do. "We both know it's not." She's too used to her own good sometimes. It makes me feel like a giant dick when I think about what if he backs out on our plans. "Thank you for sneaking snacks in for Dad. Dad's always been picky about food, but it's so much worse now that his diet is limited to what the hospital serves. Mom and I think he's losing weight faster than he should be."

She shifts on her feet, crossing her arms over her chest and tucking her hands into her armpits. "It could be his body's way of fighting. It takes a lot of energy to battle all the infected cells his body is producing. The immune system is only part of the healing process."

hot sun It's the same spiel I'm sure she's given other families who have loved ones fighting for their lives. He's doing his best considering how advanced things have gotten. We should be grateful he's fighting at all.

Not wanting to think about it any longer, I ask, "Do you want to reschedule dinner?"

more you Once again, her eyes go behind her. This time, a finger goes up from the nurse, a shift supervisor, gesturing for her to come over. "I don't know, Caleb."

I step toward her, lowering my voice. "I know why you're hesitating. Instead, promise not to bail this time, and I won't ask anything about Dad."

ling the There's nothing that says she can't date a patient's family member as long as she's not sharing important information that violates HIPAA. I checked into it before I even asked her out a few weeks ago.

Her eyes soften. “When you didn’t text me back last night, I thought, before was a sign that we should reconsider this. You’ve got a lot going on now between your dad, the store, school. And I’d understand if you don’t. She’s ready for anything right now after what happened with your hospital relationship.”

Emma knows I got out of a long-term relationship, but I never would have told her the details of how serious it was. Like how I’d planned on marrying her before being brutally rejected on one knee. I’d decided my pride could take a few girlstake so many hits.

The fewer people who know, the better.

With a heavy sigh, I swipe at my tired eyes. “I really am sorry about getting back to you. It didn’t have anything to do with you—us. Every time I started to reply, Mom needed something. It got so late that I ended up leaving them out. Things haven’t been going as smoothly as I’d hoped they would.”

I’ve been managing the best I can on my own for the past couple of months without dumping my issues onto anyone, no matter how much I want to. He’s wanted to. The number of times I’ve nearly broken down, wondering about my options, fuck I got here, without the woman I still love, watching my father weigh trying to move on as if that could somehow help it hurt less, is too numerous to count.

I don’t want to unload that on the one girl who could be an escape from that part of my life.

So I stand a little taller. “I’d still like to take you out again. I can pick you up at seven tonight if that sounds good. You mentioned how badly you’ve loved been wanting a burger, and there’s this really good brewery called Woodland that serves some of the best I’ve ever had.” When she hesitates, I add, “I could honestly use a break from life. I’m looking for someone to date.”

It’s unfair of me to ask her for anything, but it feels good to be able to tell her when all I do is offer myself to everybody else.

“..” Rubbing her arm, she lets out a tiny breath and smiles faintly. “I’ll do it, but I’m moving back on my heels, she reaches out and brushes my hand. “I’m looking forward to it. I’ll see you later. Okay? *Text me.*”

I watch her walk off and find myself frowning at the empty parking lot. I hollowing my chest even after the plans are made.

I do need a break. From summer classes. From the store. From the

ght that horrible as it makes me sound, I need Emma to give me a distraction right for an hour or two. I need to feel like there's someone out there who can't give me even an ounce of the peace I'd once had.

ur last She'll never replace Raine, but she might replace *something* that'll fill the hole Raine left behind after I begged her to tell me what was wrong.

ent into *"I'm confused," Raine tells me, tears welling in her eyes as she sits around my old bedroom at the football house. "It's always been us, and only how isn't that terrifying to you? What if there are things I can't give you someday? What if there's something out there we don't know about? What people we could be missing out on?"*

out not I stop her. *"Where is this coming from? It's always been us against the world. What could you possibly not give me that would make you question passing we're good enough to make it? I love you. Isn't that enough?"*

uple of *Her lips quiver as she swipes at her cheeks and shakes her head. "I don't know if love can be enough this time. Not forever."*

ch I've Those words still hurt like hell.

ow the She was worried there was something else out there—something bad, like a lie, and was a punch to the gut to think she was looking for somebody who could give me everything I wasn't. Since when was love not enough? When was she not enough for her?

oe from *"I can't do this."* That's what she told me when she walked toward the bedroom door that day, avoiding my touch. *"I'm sorry, Caleb. I can't do this."*

you've It was the world's biggest non-breakup. She didn't tell me it was over, she didn't tell me she was through. Didn't tell me she didn't love me. In bed, she floods the lines, and evidently the tears, was the truth.

forward She was over it. Over me. Over us. Because she didn't think our love was enough for us to last.

selfish *"Caleb?"* Mom calls out, breaking my train of thought. Her voice is cheerful for something bad to have happened, so I force myself to walk into the room, where I catch my father's eyes.

d. *"I'm"* In that frail, all-knowing voice, he says, *"She's a nice girl, son."*

ess still *she is."* I don't recognize my own voice when I murmur a robotic *"Yeah, she is."*

Mom says, *"Make sure you're ready, baby boy. You'll only hurt yourself if you try to force something. And it's not fair to Emma or anyone else."*

n, even if you're not fully healed from Raine yet. The heart needs time to recover.  
an offer This time, I don't say anything.

Because I don't want to bullshit them with false promises like I've  
fill the been getting from doctors this whole damn time.

2 paces



Caleb.

ive you I WAS FIFTEEN when I went to my first house party that a classmate  
? Other throwing while his parents were out of town. A few of my friends on the  
school football team decided to go together, but it didn't take long before  
inst the all disbanded to drink and try picking up girls.

stion if That night was full of other firsts too.

'I don't First time I asked a girl to dance with me. First time I played  
minutes in heaven. And the first time I almost kissed a girl.

All firsts I shared with Raine Copelin.

etter. It I'd seen the girl with dark red hair plenty of times before at school  
ould be head was almost always buried in a thick book in the library, with a  
s I not her mouth that she tended to chew the end of as she read. She'd sneal  
favorite snack, Milk Duds, until the librarian caught her and lectured  
about how there was no food or drinks allowed in the library.

ard the We'd interacted a few times before the party, but mostly in passing  
an't do when the pen she'd been chewing on leaked and she had blue ink all over  
face. Or when her shoelace was untied in gym, and I was afraid she'd  
is over, doing our mandatory two laps before every gym class began.

etween That party changed everything.

ve was "We don't have to do anything," I promise her, readjusting in the  
closet we were shoved into after the bottle pointed at each of us.

surprised she was even at the party, much less participating. She  
e is too seemed like the type who was interested in being around a lot of people.

lk back Her squirming gets worse as she looks toward the door, then back

"Won't they figure it out?"

I know I shake my head. "Most of them are drunk. They don't even know  
from right. I think we're safe."

yourself A small smile appears on her face. "What do we do for the next  
dy else eyes go to her phone screen—"five minutes?"



ver.” I said the one thing that jump-started the next seven years. “*Tell me you.*”

they’ve So she told me about how she was an only child, her mother work tailor, her dad was in real estate, she had been trying to get a dog for a year to no avail, and she was planning on going to college to be a psychologist or counselor.

The rest came after.

I stare at the yellow Milk Duds box on the counter display beside the register at Anders Hardware and grumble to myself before closing the textbook and pushing up from the counter.

“Finding everything all right, Phil?” I call out to the elderly man who’s here at least once a week for some new project he’s doing. Ever since he retired, he’s been restless. If it’s not his house he’s working on, it’s on his neighbors’ or kids’ places. It seems to make him happy to keep his wife even happier to have the man with cabin fever out of her hair while.

Phil walks out of the plumbing aisle holding a new valve kit. “Four dollars in my own this time, kid,” he tells me, dropping it onto the counter in front of me. “Don’t suppose I can get one of those loyal customer discounts, do you?”

My lips quirk up at the corners as I ring him up and apply the employee discount for ten percent off. “I got you, Phil. Who’s this for? Last week we were replacing the leaking garden hose for Mrs. DeMarcus over on Elm Street.”

He passes me a fifty-dollar bill, which I make change for as he tells me about how his son-in-law doesn’t know anything about being handy. “I’m telling you, son, my Maise could have done so much better than this slicker. But she loves him, so what’s a father to do?”

Love is a pain in the ass like that. It hits you hard and keeps a firm grip on you even when you wish it didn’t.

Phil puts some of the spare change in the glass tip jar that’s got pennies and quarters in the bottom. “Tell your dad I said hi. The missus says she’s missed seeing him around. We’re wishing him the best.”

Adam’s apple bobbing, I nod. “I will. Good luck on the new project. We’ll let you know if you need anything else.”

After he leaves, I drop back into the seat and stare at the candy jar again. Despite all the assignments I’m behind on, I decide to reorganize

e about things in the store instead.

After an hour, all the candy is off to the side and out of my line of sight. I had a Milk Duds included. If Dad ever sees it, I'm sure he'll have a thing or two to say, but I'd rather have my peace of mind since I'm the one out of my home who spends the most time here.

I pull out my phone and send a quick text to a few friends and Emma.

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*Me: Looking forward to mini golf tomorrow*

She's working, so I don't expect a response anytime soon. At dinner date, I drove her home and kissed her goodbye. She wore bright lipstick that was inviting as hell, but it still felt nothing like the soft pink lips that hardly ever saw makeup at all. I wish she'd invited me in and his was probably better that she didn't.

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Sometime later, Emma replies with three red hearts and nothing else. All I can think is...Raine hated emojis.

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Sometime later, Emma replies with three red hearts and nothing else.

All I can think is...Raine hated emojis.

## Chapter Two

# RAINE

LIGHTNING CRACKS ALONG the sky, accompanied by another rumble of thunder that rattles the porch windows behind me, but the rain never comes. The air is hot and humid, and the wind whipping the trees is causing the branches to make all sorts of unruly noises against the glass that have the tiny dog in my lap whimpering. I watch the storm unravel around us.

Fingers grooming the fur of my aunt's mixed mutt, I whisper, "It's just Buddy. Your mom will be home soon to curl under the blankets with."

Walking, feeding, and cuddling the cutie curled up on me only makes me want a dog ten times more than before. Especially now that I'm on my own. They say dogs make the best companions anyway.

When Aunt Tiffany heard I'd be in Virginia for the summer, she insisted I come to stay with me at the family cabin so I wouldn't be completely by myself. I'm not like the pathetic, broken-hearted college graduate that I am. Usually my parents and Caleb would show up for a week or two around the Fourth of July, but not this year. Mom and Dad are in the middle of their divorce. Caleb is probably casting a spell to curse me for breaking his heart, and Aunt Tiffany is my mother's cynical sister who likes to make comments about love is for fools anyway.

Though Tiffany hasn't exactly been around lately because she likes to sneak off to the local community center under the guise of volunteering, I'm not completely naive to the inner workings of Radcliff. The community center doesn't typically take volunteers, not even when they host bingo.

She doesn't think anybody knows about Casey, the attractive boy who works behind the counter at the building. The women in my family like to act like they're better off alone after every single one of them has been up divorced, starting with my great-grandmother Claudette, followed by my grandmother Maud, Aunt Tiffany, and now my mother.

Apparently, my aunt wants to keep her newest man under wraps that'll somehow break the curse we all seem to think we're stuck with. Sort of cute watching her sneak around like a teenager. Pointless but cute.

I find myself smiling at the feisty woman who looks just like my mother. From our porcelain-doll skin to our lean statures to our dark eyes with speckles of gold in them, we all look nearly identical, with the exception of our various shades of red hair. Mom and Tiffany both look like reincarnations of Susan Hayward—Dad's favorite classic movie actress—because of his chocolate-brown hair, mine is a dark shade of burgundy brown and red highlights that's pretty in its own way but nothing like that of my parents. And maybe that's a good thing.

I learned to be independent to a fault because of the women in my life who had to do so much on their own when their relationships fell apart. I spent years looking up to Tiffany and Grandma Maud, wanting to be just like them because I could see the strength in their motivation to build something beautiful for their futures. They were both dealt shitty hands with their lives but managed to get out before it was too late. I didn't know my grandmother very well before she died, but I was told plenty of stories that always made me cautious about how I'd mold my future.

I swore to myself that I'd never wind up in the same situation as my parents, miserable from my choices.

*Well, congratulations, that bitter little voice inside my head taunts you're alone too, all because of one secret. Happy now?*

The next crack of thunder scares me out of my quickly developing thoughts. My startled jump makes Buddy tumble off my lap and bolt through his doggy door into the house.

Despite this cabin being full of fun memories with the people I love, there are some bad ones too, with people I hardly even knew.

Summer was always the season full of mistakes.

The crushing feeling in my chest reminds me that those mistakes are what got me here in the first place.

I think of the boy with brown eyes that I'd fall asleep to dream of every night. His eyes were always soft, warm, and full of love whenever they were directed at me.

But those beautiful eyes instantly changed when I opened my mouth at my graduation, and to this day I still think about those two words I told him

thunder

It's hot  
to make  
as we

s okay,

likes me  
my own.

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lly, my  
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ce, and  
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immunity  
senior

hemian

family  
wound

by my

as if *I can't.*

ith. It's *I can't.*

ite. *I can't.*

and my Now I'm in a different state, getting eaten alive by tiny bugs as the  
brownair frizzes my hair. All because of one night after s'mores, one too  
with thebeers, and a cute blond boy who flashed me a smile.

ook like It isn't even that night I regret. I was young and dumb, but I didn't  
ess. But anybody anything. It's everything that happened afterward that haunts

dy with Tiffany told me I should just stay in Virginia instead of going to  
e either New York for grad school, but I think it's only because she wanted

family here. Ever since Maud passed away, she hasn't had many people  
family the area unless we visited for the summer. All she has is a small apartment  
apart. In northern Virginia, the cabin here, which is in Mom's name, and the neighbor  
ust like pretends she's not half in love with Caleb because she doesn't want to believe  
nothing that sort of thing.

men in Aunt Tiffany never minced her words whenever I'd visit during  
low my summer. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," she'd tell me whenever  
ies that bring up my high school sweetheart. It isn't as if my family ever cared

him. A man like Caleb is impossible *not* to like, and even my cynical  
any of admitted as much. Still, her comments over the years fed into the anger

felt when he dropped to his knee in front of the crowd of people at graduation.  
ts. Now and asked me to spend the rest of my life with him.

In spite of my family watching and expecting me to say yes, I couldn't  
declining force it out. I love Caleb. But are we capable of loving each other forever  
through we can't give each other everything we want out of life?

Swallowing, I pull my legs up to my chest and grab my notebook  
e, there the tiny table that my grandfather carved from a log. The end of the bench

is chewed up from all the mindless gnawing I do when I should be reading  
new case study to keep up on the psychology assignments bound to

re what me when grad school starts in the fall. The only benefit to being surprised  
by failed relationships my whole life is figuring out how badly I'd loved

almost them for others. That's why I want to become a counselor.

er they Clicking the pen to release its tip, I open to the page I left off on,  
marked up with little comments in the margins of the pages.

outh at More lighting flashes across the sky.

n. More thunder shakes the ground.

Nibbling my bottom lip, I rest my head against the back of the chair and stare up at the sky, trying to sort out my thoughts.

I hear car tires make their way up the gravel driveway and know my aunt's friend is bringing her back. I take a deep breath of the muggy air and set my feet back down and watching as Tiffany carefully exits the passenger seat of the car parked several feet away.

I force a smile when I hear my aunt's friend call out, "She's a preme. Tiff." I think her name is Jodi. She always covers for my aunt when they're out because heaven forbid anybody knows she's dating someone more than a smart one too. Learned a lesson we certainly didn't at her age. Look at me, I'm able to travel and have alone time whenever she wants. I'm not jealous I didn't leave sooner to have that experience for myself."

Smart would have been following my heart no matter how many times I was warned by the woman walking up the steps that the heart would lead me nowhere in life.

"Think with your brain, Raine."

The human brain is our most complex organ, and unlike our hearts, it doesn't give up far too easily.

When Tiffany sees the skeptical look I'm giving her, she wiggles her finger at me. "I don't want any comments from you. I seem to recall not that long ago when you were sneaking back in after that surfer who wouldn't was dropping you off from the party you went to."

Heart hammering at the reminder, I lower my pen and stand with a "Don't bring him up. It was a long time ago."

My aunt rolls her eyes. "Nobody is a saint, Raine. Not even you."

As if she has to remind me.

adding a

drown

ounded

e to fix

already



THE SECOND MY toes dip into the cool pool water a few days later, it instantly brought back to my sixteenth birthday. Since my birthday is always spent it poolside with my family barbecuing. They'd invite neighbors because most of them had kids around my age, and we'd have a neighborhood party.

hair and That summer, I met Cody. Considering the blond-haired, blue-eyed, seventeen-year-old changed my entire perspective on life after one hour, it's my never even knew his last name. His family was only visiting friends for a few days before. The invite he'd gotten to the party was a fluke. Looking back, it should have never entertained him when I had Caleb, even if we had the exclusivity talk yet.

But I knew the second he flashed his charming smile that made me never I was done for. Had I known that I'd agree to sneak off later that night? No. But I definitely wasn't drunk enough to blame alcohol. "She's my decision to sleep with him."

Dunking my head underwater, I come up for air and comb my hair a little out of my face with my fingers.

"I'm heading out," Tiffany calls to me from the back door. "You left a message on the landline. She said you weren't picking up your phone." Frowning, I wade over to the edge of the pool and lean against the railing. "I thought you said you were going to hang out here with me. Are you ordering pizza later? I finally found the takeout menu buried in the drawers."

If Aunt Tiffany remembers it's my twenty-third birthday, she doesn't mention it. I didn't hear her say it when I walked into the kitchen earlier, and she made no mention of it in the hours since.

She looks at her watch. "I made plans already, but I'll let you know when I get back in time. Buddy has already been out and is sleeping in the guest room, so he'll be fine until tonight. Enjoy the sunshine!"

Watching her leave, I push up from the tile and grab my towel from the lounge. When I find my cell, I see some missed texts from Mom and a couple of missed calls from former sorority sisters. After returning the calls and people's birthday wishes, I see Mom's number pop up on the screen again.

Swiping to accept, I put my cell to my ear and say, "You said you'd call me last night."

Mom sighs. "I'm sorry, sweetie. Your father called to finalize the divorce. I swear, that man can't even be decisive about his own divorce. One second he wants it, the next he doesn't."

The last thing I want to hear about is my parents' divorce, so I work on wrapping my towel around my body and sit on the edge of the lounge chair. "Did Tiffany call you? She said she was going to call me."



half-eyes to check in with you about coming down here before I head back to New York, but she was tired after dinner, so I don't know if she brought it or a few didn't even want to watch *Real Housewives*."

Now, I Mom makes an amused noise. "I think your aunt is finally realizing she can't keep at it like she used to. She texted me at two in the morning the other night. *Two!* She's going to be forty soon. It's ridiculous how she blushes like a preteen sometimes. We spoke earlier today about me coming out of the closet some point, but I don't know, Raine. I may not be able to swing it through the divorce. Things with the divorce have been dragging on longer than I expected. I don't want to keep delaying it being finalized. But enough about that. Let me get your hair done with the details."

My whole life I've had to hear them bicker about something. Dad never momfews dirty dishes in the sink. Mom didn't set the code for the garage door. "I never failed."

It's not that Dad has always loved me, but I don't know if he's always loved her. We still never cheated, at least to my knowledge, but it was obvious that he was in the kitchen that invested in making things work. Which, sadly, is probably for the best at the end. The only thing I truly care about is if they're happy, even if it means they aren't say them living two separate lives.

And she's "I'm sad you're not here," I tell her quietly, playing with a loose strand of hair on the towel. "The neighbors put a new pool in, so I got to spend the summer if I'm there while they grilled. It was fun. The whole neighborhood basically sat in the pool room together. You would have loved it."

Mom loves being social. It was one of the reasons I liked her being around. She took the lead when people talked us up, and that way I didn't have to and answer a million questions about my life.

And a few "I wish I was there too. I'll do my best to find time before you're here for school. Which reminds me—"

I'd call I groan, knowing what's coming next.

"Are you sure that you want to go back to Lindon? You have other some frankly better options for getting your master's and certification. I got to see about and saw at least three other universities that would be a better fit for your academic level. You'd have a better reputation with degrees from those schools for those."

I'd sit on We both know it isn't the school's reputation that she's trying to save. It's going from. "I already told you that I'm going to be fine, Mom. It's not the

to Newthe world. Lindon is my home, and nothing will change that.”  
up. She When she’s quiet, I know it’s because she’s trying to find any ex  
convince me otherwise. But she knows I’m right. Lindon is where I w  
ing thatand raised. All my memories are there. The good and the bad.  
ing the Caleb is a mix I can’t avoid forever.  
he acts “I just worry,” she finally admits softly.  
lown at “I know.”  
is year. “I want you to be happy.”  
d, and I “I know.”  
I won’t “Maybe if your father stops trying to take half of everything, we  
you into a better program elsewhere once you finish your first seme  
d left ayou could talk to him about it. You’ve always had him wrapped arou  
door. Itlittle finger of yours.”

Eye twitching at the undertone in her voice, I rub my clammy palm  
er. He’sthe side of my thigh. “I’ll think about it.”

asn’t all I won’t.  
best in I’ve made up my mind already.  
t means Hoping to turn the conversation around, I change gears with a  
tone to my voice. “Since today is my—”

thread “Baby, I’ve got to go. Your father is calling me *again*.”  
Fourth Blowing out an agitated breath, I say, “Okay. Well, can you call m  
ally got The call ends before I can finish my sentence, leaving me staring  
background picture of me and Caleb from last year. I changed it short  
ig here.graduation, but my chest tightened whenever I looked at the pretty  
have topicture I replaced it with. It was too much change too quickly.

With the reluctant truth that the people closest to me forgot my bir  
re backspend the rest of the day watching sappy eighties movies and sulking  
room.

Just before I go to bed, a text comes through from the last person I

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Caleb: *Happy birthday*

ave me  
end of

the world. Lindon is my home, and nothing will change that.”

When she’s quiet, I know it’s because she’s trying to find any excuse to convince me otherwise. But she knows I’m right. Lindon is where I was born and raised. All my memories are there. The good and the bad.

Caleb is a mix I can’t avoid forever.

“I just worry,” she finally admits softly.

“I know.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“I know.”

“Maybe if your father stops trying to take half of everything, we can get you into a better program elsewhere once you finish your first semester. Or you could talk to him about it. You’ve always had him wrapped around that little finger of yours.”

Eye twitching at the undertone in her voice, I rub my clammy palm down the side of my thigh. “I’ll think about it.”

I won’t.

I’ve made up my mind already.

Hoping to turn the conversation around, I change gears with a hopeful tone to my voice. “Since today is my—”

“Baby, I’ve got to go. Your father is calling me *again*.”

Blowing out an agitated breath, I say, “Okay. Well, can you call me—”

The call ends before I can finish my sentence, leaving me staring at the background picture of me and Caleb from last year. I changed it shortly after graduation, but my chest tightened whenever I looked at the pretty garden picture I replaced it with. It was too much change too quickly.

With the reluctant truth that the people closest to me forgot my birthday, I spend the rest of the day watching sappy eighties movies and sulking in my room.

Just before I go to bed, a text comes through from the last person I expect.

**Caleb:** *Happy birthday*

## Chapter Three

# CALEB

I'M GRABBING MY ratty notebook off the desk and sliding my pen in the pocket of my jeans when the professor says, "I expect the first draft of your business proposals to be in my inbox by midnight tomorrow. All late assignments will have two points deducted for every hour it hasn't been submitted. I'm not allowing any excuses because it's summer. I don't care if you're going on a beach vacation. Send your work in before you hit the road or whatever the hell you kids do for fun."

Squeezing my eyes closed at the newest addition to my growing list of assignments, I swear silently to myself and push up from the desk. Even if I agree with Professor Neilson, the likelihood of him giving me an extension is as strong as from my other teachers.

In fact, this assignment *should* be easy considering I've been working at Dad's store basically my whole life. I learned to count by helping with the inventory, learned addition and subtraction while helping with the books, and learned manners and common courtesy by watching my old man deal with customers.

I owe Richard Anders a lot and want nothing more than to make him proud by taking over Anders Hardware. Football might have been a passion I loved to share with my buddies from the day I joined the youth team until the day I signed on as Lindon U's running back, but the family business is always going to be the endgame. Which means anything I can learn about business will be successful will be helpful before...

Throat tightening at the inevitable news we're bound to get about the store, I clear it before walking up to the older man wearing his usual tweed jacket. "Professor?"

Neilson looks up. "I'm looking forward to your proposal, Caleb. I'll have you write one based on the hardware store."

I hold back the slight flinch. "Yeah, I was thinking about it. Bu

wondering if—”

“Trust me, you don’t want to reinvent the wheel. If there’s some place at Anders, tweak it to fit your vision for the business. It’ll make life a lot easier.”

The knowing look he gives me has me backing down from asking for an extra day or two. I’m supposed to go in to the store after my last class and head over to the hospital before visiting hours end. It doesn’t provide

time for me to focus on homework, but I’m not about to say that to Ne

Dad’s declining health isn’t a secret, especially not in a small area

Lindon. I’ve rarely used it as a reason to get out of anything, and

have, it’s because I couldn’t physically do whatever I was supposed

to have gotten a few bad marks on class projects that I’d normally ace. My pro

fessor would comment on the obvious decline of my classwork and offer

extensions or extra credit work for me to up my overall GPA once I

bring up about the reason, but I never liked it. I was better than using my

circumstances to get a helping hand. Even if I needed it.

People like Professor Neilson don’t seem like the type to offer sympathy

Mostly because he isn’t keen on giving athletes an extra helping hand

some of the faculty tend to. He said during my very first class with him

he wasn’t going to set a bad example by giving anyone a free pass

because they can catch a ball and score a touchdown. I received the news

loud and clear then, and it hasn’t changed now, even if the circum

stances have.

Shoulders dropping a fraction at the late night ahead of me, I nod

“Good idea, sir. I’ll see you on Monday.”

He gathers his things without so much as giving me a second look

and a good weekend. Tell your father I said hi. I’ve been hoping for the best

I’m glad he doesn’t look at me, or else he would have seen what

anybody witnessing on my face.

Weakness.

Scrubbing my face with my hand as I walk through the quad, I

mentally prioritize everything going on today. Mom is with Dad right

now which means he’ll have company until I can close down the store. Mom

it’s slow enough, I’ll be able to start on my assignment and see if I

can help later since he always likes getting involved in my business

and brings back some normalcy.

As though he's not dying.

hing in I think we both like playing pretend.

ke your I head toward my beat-up Ford that Dad gave me when I first  
license. If I were smart, I'd pool together some of the money I've been  
g for an and find a new one that doesn't nickel-and-dime me at every corner. I  
ss, then truck, though coated with rust and whining from old age, holds a  
a ton of valuable memories with the people I love that I'm not ready to give up  
ilson. Not yet.

rea like Maybe not ever.

when I Cranking up the AC that only works half the time, I head toward  
to. I've Street to grab the largest cup of coffee that Bea's Bakery has before g  
ofessors my shift. Once Raine quit at the hardware store after my botched pr  
ertain we had a spot open that we couldn't afford not to fill. Business  
opened boomed at the beginning of summer, right when Dad got too sick to h  
/ Dad's sit and life got too messy to handle an entire store on my own. Even if  
like I'm doing ninety percent of the work anyway, it's nice having  
npathy. my part-timer, there when I go to class.

nd like "There's my boy." Bea, the owner of Bea's Bakery, greets me  
im that walk up to the counter. The older woman gives me a once-over with a  
ass just looks like you could use some caffeine. Have you not been sleeping?"

message "You have no idea," I reply tiredly, knowing there are dark bag  
stances my eyes that age me a few years beyond my twenty-two. "Can I get a l  
my regular? And maybe one of those blueberry scones if you have an  
ur mur, could use a pick-me-up."

"Working today?"

. "Have "Yes, ma'am." *When am I not?*

st." "And how is school going?"

t I hate "Busy."

"You know," she remarks, starting to prepare my order, "you don't  
to get a master's degree to run a business. Your father has taught you  
I try to already. Hands-on experience will teach you the rest."

ht now, Pressing my lips together, I remain quiet. I've heard that before  
aybe if Dad. But there's a lot I still don't know and things Dad won't have  
Dad can teach me. The last thing I want to do is fuck this up and ruin everyt  
urses. It worked so hard to build.

When Bea places a to-go cup and pastry bag in front of me, she ad

I'm saying is that it won't do you any good to run yourself ragged. Neither of your parents wants to see that happen to you, least of all now. I got my Swallowing, I give her a solemn nod and try passing her some more. I'm saving She swats my hand away. "On the house. I think you need it. I'll But this before you're late. And think about what I said. Food for thought." I a lot of I pick up the items, trying to smile half-heartedly. "Giving away things isn't exactly smart business, Bea. I may not know a lot, but college taught me that much."

Her smile grows. "One day, you'll see that paying it forward and Mainsomebody needs it most will get you a lot further in life than holding on to hand in expectation."

proposal, Taking that into consideration, I walk out and head down the street always where my truck is parked outside the hardware store.

help run I'm almost relieved when I see nobody besides Ronny inside. It feels like time to work on homework before going through receipts, monthly Ronny, and inventory. That's something Mom usually does, but she spends most of her time at the hospital these days, and I don't feel right bringing anything when I'm there while she's there. When she offers, I always tell her I've got it under tsk. "It control."

"Slow day?" I ask, voice hopeful as I drop my things behind the counter under Ronny shrugs. He's thirty with a baby on the way. The second child large of says this job on top of the full-time gig he has at the post office works out pretty well. I them bring in extra income, which is a big reason why Mom agreed to let him to the payroll. She's a softy, especially when babies are involved. I quiet most of the day, but you know that can change at any time."

When he's gathering his things and clocking out at the computer register, I say, "I hope that's not the case."

He slaps my shoulder and squeezes once. "I do too, man. I talked to Mom about adding on another couple of shifts to help a little more. I'll plenty you tomorrow, and we can talk about the schedule."

I nod. "Thanks, Ron. Tell Ana I said hi."

—from When I'm by myself, I take out my notebooks and personal laptop to begin working on assignments I'm behind on for school. If I don't start something a few of the assignments loading on my screen, my GPA will drop significantly. Again.

ds, "All Not even five minutes into the paper I've pulled up, the bell to th

d, boy. door rings and three older men, including Phil the fixer-upper, w  
w.” asking for help picking out the proper supplies for their plumbing proje  
ey. Underneath the counter, my hands squeeze together before unclen  
Now go have to take a long, deep breath and an even longer sip of coffee  
standing up and offering the smile Dad told me to form even on the ba  
ay free “Follow me,” I tell them.  
ege has



l when  
g out a “YOU LOOK LIKE hell, son” is how Dad greets me a few days later, hi  
raspy but his dark eyes glinting with humor.  
treet to My lips kick up as I close the door. “I’m pretty sure that’s suppose  
my line,” I tell him, pulling a chair up to his bedside and looking at  
’ll give of food in front of him. “You’ve barely eaten. Did Mom get you a  
ly bills, from the deli like you wanted? I can call and see—”  
most of He waves me off. “We both know Gretchen’s closed for the nig  
thing to not hungry, anyway. The new medicine has made it hard to eat. Eve  
t under tastes metallic still.” That was one of the symptoms of the old medi  
was on. Apparently, it hasn’t gone away like it was supposed to.  
unter. going to get good food, I want to actually enjoy it.”  
one. He My eyes go to the door for a moment before glancing back at the  
ill help barely picked at. There’s applesauce, a favorite of his, and a sad-  
to add sandwich that I can’t blame him for not touching. “Mom is going to a  
“Been report as soon as I get back,” I remind him, picking up the little conta  
applesauce and passing it to him after opening it. “And I’d rather no  
by the her. I was raised better than that, remember?”  
Those frail, chapped lips lift at the corners for a brief moment. “Y  
to your pain in my ass, you know that?”  
I’ll see A lump forms in my throat as I watch him wrap his skinny fingers  
the plastic container and pick up the spoon resting on the tray. “I know  
Speaking of, would you mind going over some homework with me if  
ptop to up for it?”  
submit a That perks him up. “Which class?”  
ll drop I’m in two courses this summer until the fall semester starts in a cc  
weeks. I only get a week and a half off before diving back into a full s  
ie front



talk in, of coursework. “Business Ethics. Neilson had us submit a business project. A few days ago and gave us some feedback when we got them back to check. I said he’ll give us extra points toward our next exam grade if we turn in proposals based on his suggestions and resubmit. I could use your advice. A few different ideas I had that could go well with his comments.”

I don’t tell him that I really need the extra points. I’d like him to be still prospering so he isn’t worrying about more than he needs to. Dad doesn’t agree with my choice to go to school for my master’s in business administration, but he supports me regardless.

His voice. He watches me carefully before focusing on the food in his shaky hands. “I don’t think much needs to change at the store. If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

I figured he’d say as much, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any upgrades that could benefit the business that this project could be an outline for. “I’m not planning on doing anything extravagant. Just a few things.”

“I’m not even dead yet, and you’re already trying to change everything,” he says, cutting me off in a sharp, uncharacteristic tone.

We both fall to silence. I feel my heart drop into the bottom of a cage while he heaves a long sigh and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, closing his eyes and setting his apple down. One of his fingers scratches his temple. “I don’t know why I said that.”

The doctor said this could happen.

I’ve noticed little changes in him ever since the tumor was found. His temper is shorter, and his mood swings happen in the blink of an eye. A six-foot-five man who’s nothing more than skin and bones lying in front of me used to be a giant teddy bear. He rarely raised his voice unless he was justified and nearly never lost his temper.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I readjust in the chair and look at the television which is playing a golf game. Dad hates golf. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see if there’s something else on the television?”

He blinks, slowly looking up as if he didn’t even know the name of the anything on. “I don’t mind this. Why else would I go to all your games to watch you play it?”

I blink. “I didn’t play golf.”

For a moment, he looks perplexed by that. It takes him a few seconds before he slowly nods in realization. “Right, right. Football. Damn.”

proposal a player too. I remember when that coach of yours back in high school day. He told your mom and me about convincing you to talk to the recruiters.”

He said the “He wanted me to consider somewhere other than Lindon. I didn’t like it because he talked to you guys about it.”

Dad hums. “Many times. Said Notre Dame was watching you. A shame I’m not a fan. A *shame*? He never seemed interested in me pursuing that career path.”

For the rest of the night, he watches the television screen as if he’s been a huge fan of the boring sport playing. I remember all the times he’d rant about how slow the game was and how nothing exciting ever happened.

Unless a gator popped up from whatever green they were on down on the field.

When Mom bought him a polo shirt, Dad said he’d wear it when they went out to a nice dinner and then lied about it suffering a washing machine accident.

The quiet gives me time to do some homework at least, with Dad’s “What’s new?” questions every so often. I don’t bring up any changes to the store or anything, his diminished memory, and he doesn’t ask about them.

It’s a little bittersweet, but I let it go.

When visiting hours get close to ending, I readjust my feet where they’re propped on the end of the bed and ask, “How are you really feeling?”

He says, “I’m good. I know you try saving Mom’s feelings from getting hurt. I want to know the truth.”

His eyes trail to mine with hesitation, the glassy, dark orbs showing how unwell he really is without him having to confirm it. “It’s not that bad. I’m trying to preserve anybody’s feelings, Caleb.”

I watch as my old man’s throat works with a thick emotion that he’s never even begin to imagine. He’s never been very vulnerable with his feelings, at least not to me.

So whatever is clouding his eyes, making them glaze over, at least not to me. So whatever is clouding his eyes, making them glaze over the TV, with fresh tears that he fights to hold back, tells me that he’s got more emotion internally than he allows any of us to know.

His Adam’s apple bobs again. “I’m tired, son. So damn tired. And I’m sure you’re was lying if I said I wasn’t a little scared too, but I think I’m starting to feel things. So don’t think I’m trying to downplay anything for you or your mother. We all have to make peace with the life we’re given, and I think it’s my turn to do that. No more fighting the inevitable. Sometimes you just have to accept it.”

There’s nothing for me to say after that.

There’s nothing for me to say after that.

There’s nothing for me to say after that.

There’s nothing for me to say after that.

I talked      He pats my arm, as if he understands the turmoil going on in my head.  
't know      Not even I do, though.

name.”

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He pats my arm, as if he understands the turmoil going on in my head.  
Not even I do, though.

## Chapter Four

# RAINE

A BEAD OF sweat trickles down the side of my temple as I pull my hair into a tight updo and perch on the edge of the pool while dipping my feet in the water. I release a sigh of relief and lean back, closing my eyes and listening to kids laughing, adults gossiping, and dogs barking in the distance.

My ears perk up to the sound of somebody dropping down beside me. Christopher Hayes, one of my summertime buddies who comes to town a few weeks during the season, shoots me the same goofy smile that's always on his face.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," I tease, nudging his shoulder with mine.

It's hard to imagine that the boy sitting next to me used to be the shortest one in our friend group since he's well over six feet now. He's also paler than me, which is evident in the way his Irish skin all but glows in the sunlight.

"Did you put on sunblock?" I ask, a little worried about him being shirtless. I don't blame him since it's ninety-four today, but I remember a few years ago when he got sun poisoning and was sick for weeks.

Chris rolls his eyes, sliding his legs into the pool that our neighbors always leave open for people to enjoy. "You're such a mom's girl," he muses.

A twinge of pain settles into my stomach at the teasing jab.

In exasperation, he adds, "My mom wouldn't let me leave the house if she watched me put it on."

My eyes do a scan of the lawn to see if Mrs. Hayes is out here with her adorable French bulldog. "I haven't seen her much this summer. I wish I had a chance to stop and fuss over Pumpkin when they're out walking."

The face he makes has me smiling. "She heard about all the sightings and has been terrified to walk her usual trail. One of my

showed her TikTok videos of bears going after tiny dogs, so now petrified of bringing Pumpkin anywhere people have reported seeing cubs. I'll tell her you said hi. I'm not sure she's coming today."

I frown. "That makes two moms then."

His brows dart up. "Janet isn't here?"

My mother's name only deepens the frown as I kick my feet in the air back and watch the little ripples move outward. "Nope. My parents are going through with the divorce that they've been threatening each other all these years."

It's a little embarrassing to admit, but most of the people who've met into near my family's cabin have heard at least one fight from my stance. whenever they were here. Almost every time they get heated, it leads to one of them saying they're going to file for divorce. Even though I've advised them for a usually this is the best route for them, thinking too deeply on it isn't something I'm usually doing.

Chris doesn't say he's sorry like everybody else does, which makes me even more grateful for his friendship. But what he says is almost worse than Caleb either, or...?"

My body stiffens at the innocent inquiry. It was only a matter of time before one of my friends here asked about him, considering I've managed to avoid it so far. I assumed Tiffany told people not to bring him up, but I never confirmed or denied doing that whenever I'd mention how the gossip hadn't said anything about Caleb's absence.

People are accustomed to seeing him around for a few weeks, especially the small group of friends we used to hang out with. It's the same people who congregated in Radcliff every summer, with a few additions here and there. Cousins, friends of friends, newcomers in town for the summer, or whoever one of us is dating at the time. We've all had our fair share of extra people we've invited along and people we've tended to keep as a summer season, however long they last.

My mind goes to Cody again, causing my lips to twitch downward. Voice hoarse, I say, "Caleb and I sort of broke up."

Chris straightens, eyes widening as he turns his body toward me. "shit. I can't believe he broke up with you. What an asshole—"

"Stop," I plead, giving him a pained look that has him pursing his lips. Confusion pinches his brows when he sees the hurt on my face. V

and she obviously doesn't understand is that it's the self-inflicted kind of pain brought on by my own conflicted feelings. "It's not like that. I...it's complicated, and I'd rather not talk about it because I'm trying not to talk about it. Nothing bad happened though. There's no reason to care about anything. He's still...Caleb. He's still a good person."

the water His cheeks pinken as he relaxes his body and stares down at the water. I finally twist my hands nervously in my lap. "Sorry. I just wasn't expecting that. I never with all thought he was going to propose. Mom even asked if I thought I should show up this summer with a ring." When he sees me wince, he cringes. "I've never lived think I'm going to shut up now. Sorry. Again."

my parents Chris's awkwardness is sort of endearing, so I manage to push past my uneasiness to one heaviness weighing down my shoulders and change the subject. "Accepted going to see the fireworks at Howie's? I saw him earlier and he mentioned the huge bonfire they were doing beforehand to celebrate the end of summer."

makes me The smile I'm greeted with makes me feel a little better, even though I'm sad I'll be leaving soon. Chris asks, "Want to go together? I think Amanda and her newest boy toy are going to be there. Collin too. I don't know if you'll still see that girl. Stephanie? April?"

aged to I roll my eyes at the botched names. "Her name was Penelope, and I think they're together anymore. He's been posting about some girl named local Mika lately."

Chris pops his lips. "What's with people not being able to stick together? Specially person? It's—" When he sees the twisted face I make, he groans. "Sorry. I'm a little whobad. I just meant that Amanda and Collin go through people like that. Sometimes I think that they should just be together. They'd be perfect if they'd ever reach each other."

as who I tip my head back and close my eyes again, letting the sun soak into my skin. "Trust me," I tell him in a murmured voice, "there's no such thing as a perfect couple. Everybody has flaws. It's about how you embrace those flaws. It's about what that makes or breaks people."

We don't talk much after that even though it's obvious Chris wants to ask more questions. "No questions. He'll have to get in line though."

his lips.  
what he



of pain I'M SWATTING AWAY another bug and regretting not bringing repellent so  
s really Howie's like my aunt told me to when Chris walks over to the empty  
to think chair beside mine.

all him "You look sad," he notes, bumping his knee against mine. "I know  
mom called when we first got here. Is everything okay? I know you're  
e way Ishe couldn't make it down here."

hat. We I'm not sure "okay" is the best way to describe anything involving  
t you'dmother. Janet Copelin, soon to be Snyder again, has always been careful  
ages. "I about everything, especially when it comes to her relationship with my

I never know what she's going to say when I see her name on my phone  
t all the But it never stops me from picking up when she calls, because I know  
are youonly reason they stuck it out so long is because of me. And while I appreciate  
ntionedthe effort, I wonder what would have been different if they had just cut  
of thequits a long time ago.

There'd be fewer fights.

igh I'm Less inconsistency.

Amanda We would have all been *happier*.

r if he's I hate thinking about all the times I was angry at them for putting  
through the tense fights at home, especially when there was nothing  
I don'tdo.

named Stretching my legs out, I watch the bright orange flames of the  
crackle and pop. "Yeah, everything is fine. I wish she had come. The  
to onehas been..." I think about it before shaking my head. "Not ugly, I  
hit. Mypretty either. It's like neither of them wants to be the bad guy, you know  
crazy. My father texts me almost every day to check in on me. Sometime  
fect forhe's talkative, he'll call, but neither of us likes talking on the phone  
often. It's after we get talking about school, job applications, and I  
into myhe'll ask about Mom. I never want to turn the conversation over  
ng as abecause it leads to the same thing every time.

the flaws Frustration.

I'm tired of being the person in the middle, hearing it from both  
s to askkeep telling myself it's practice for when I'm certified. After all, isn't  
struggling couples like them what I want to do?

Chris nudges me again, amusement coating the friendly smile  
across his lips. "You keep doing that. Spacing out. Want to talk about it?"

My answer is an instant "No."



pray to His chuckle is quiet as we both watch the other people gathering  
ty lawnthe fire and surrounding yard. Howie has a big place, and it's a  
hangout during the summertime that usually leads to too much beer, f  
w youa lot more that I never participate in. It reminds me of Alden Field  
e upsetLindon, where I shared plenty of experiences with Caleb.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I blow out a breath and look to C  
ing mytry pulling myself away from those lingering memories. "Do you want  
n edgea walk?" I'm feeling too antsy to be sitting around watching Amanda  
r father.like she's auditioning for a new version of *Dirty Dancing* or a joint be  
ie. around by Collin and his pretty new friend.

ow the Chris instantly jumps up, offering me his hand to help me sta  
preciatesweet, but I shake my head and tuck my hands into the pocket of the h  
alled itstole years ago from Caleb. It used to have our old high school masco  
but it's so faded from all the times I've worn and washed it that it's  
blue sweatshirt now that's shrunk enough to fit me halfway decently.

This sweatshirt is the first one Caleb let me borrow when I came  
one of his football games. He asked me during lunch one day if  
ing meplanning on going, which I laughed nervously at. We'd barely talked  
I coulda few passing things in the hallways, so I wasn't sure why he was as  
couldn't even name all the positions on the field, much less how th  
bonfireworked. But I went anyway. When he saw me on the bleachers, he  
divorceover during halftime with the sweatshirt in his hand and told me I  
but notcold. Then he introduced me to his parents, who I'd seen around to  
w?" didn't really know, and they told me to sit next to them.

s, when It was the beginning of something beautiful. His parents both ex  
ne thatthe game whenever I had a question, and we'd all cheer Caleb on  
ife thatsitting at the edges of our seats.

to her Fiddling with my hands in the pocket of the hoodie, I walk al  
Chris in a peaceful silence. As we're rounding the fishing pond that  
installed on his property a few years ago, I can't help but ask, "Wh  
sides. Iyou ever bring anybody here during the summers? I know you must  
helpington of admirers back home."

We stop at a footbridge in the middle of the pond and lean on the  
spreadsmile to myself when I look into the water, hoping to see somethir  
it?" never been a huge fan of fishing, but I used to go with Dad and Cal—

No, I scold myself. Thinking about him always makes everythi

aroundworse.

known Throat tightening, I turn to Chris to see him looking at me with a not, and expression. “What? Do I have chocolate on my face from the s’mores?”  
back in He keeps staring quietly.

“Should I not have asked about the girl thing? It’s none of my bus  
Chris to was just curious. You’re a good guy. You deserve somebody who mal  
to takehappy.”

a dance The last thing I expect my friend to do is step toward me and p  
passedlips against mine in a rushed movement that instantly startles me. My  
dart out with panic and push on his shoulders a little harder than I m  
nd. It’smaking him lose his balance and go over the edge of the railing and  
oodie Iwater.

ot on it, My hands grip my mouth as tears prick my eyes, blurring the  
a basicquickly look over the edge and yell, “Are you okay?”

Chris resurfaces past the ripples and moves his short hair back.  
e to seestart running over, pointing, laughing, some yelling and asking if I  
I wasright.

besides My fingertips brush the lips he touched, the ones only two oth  
sking. I have before, making the tears build quicker.

e game From fear. From hurt. From a mix of emotions that I can’t quite g  
joggedthey take over and tighten my lungs.

looked I don’t want to think about either of those boys or else I’ll think of  
own but horrible things that have happened that led me here.

Choices made.

plained Regrets that haunt me.

n while It’s too much.

I wait long enough to hear Chris say he’s okay before runni  
ongsideelbowing my way through the crowd of familiar faces and feeling déj

Howieover again.

y don’t Because all I ever do is run from men.

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rails. I

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ng hurt

worse.

Throat tightening, I turn to Chris to see him looking at me with a funny expression. “What? Do I have chocolate on my face from the s’mores?”

He keeps staring quietly.

“Should I not have asked about the girl thing? It’s none of my business. I was just curious. You’re a good guy. You deserve somebody who makes you happy.”

The last thing I expect my friend to do is step toward me and press his lips against mine in a rushed movement that instantly startles me. My hands dart out with panic and push on his shoulders a little harder than I mean to, making him lose his balance and go over the edge of the railing and into the water.

My hands grip my mouth as tears prick my eyes, blurring them as I quickly look over the edge and yell, “Are you okay?”

Chris resurfaces past the ripples and moves his short hair back. People start running over, pointing, laughing, some yelling and asking if he’s all right.

My fingertips brush the lips he touched, the ones only two other boys have before, making the tears build quicker.

From fear. From hurt. From a mix of emotions that I can’t quite grasp as they take over and tighten my lungs.

I don’t want to think about either of those boys or else I’ll think of all the horrible things that have happened that led me here.

Choices made.

Regrets that haunt me.

It’s too much.

I wait long enough to hear Chris say he’s okay before running off, elbowing my way through the crowd of familiar faces and feeling déjà vu all over again.

Because all I ever do is run from men.

## Chapter Five

# CALEB

THERE HAS ALWAYS been a rush when I'm on the field that starts the r my cleats dig into the turf. Nothing compares to the freeing feeling of whipping through my helmet as soon as I take off, running each yard v ball cradled in the crook of my arm until the stadium explodes with r the touchdown is made.

Football was the mindless escape I took for granted practically my life. It was nothing more than a pastime—a hobby I'm damn good at day.

I've never regretted choosing Lindon over the University of Ten Notre Dame, or any other college that offered me full rides a opportunities for the future. As far as I was concerned, my future was right here in my hometown where I'd mold something big for mys day.

Anyone who knew me knew I saw Raine Copelin as the person that with.

Like Coach Crowe, my old high school football coach, who wou up beside me after games whenever I looked into the crowd searching and my parents. He'd say the same thing every time, as if he was hop day my answer would change. "Something tells me you're not looking scouts here to watch you play, are you?"

And the instant I laid eyes on the girl who sat by Mom and Da single game since the first one she attended our sophomore year o school, I'd wave with the dorkiest grin on my face and say, "No, Coac

He'd smack my back and tell me I was making a mistake by not se considering other colleges, but I would never let him convince me oth Because the future other people saw for me was full of sevenfigure co and Super Bowl rings.

Whenever I saw Raine wave back at me or point at the borrowec

with my number on it, I knew without a doubt in my mind I was looking for the lifetime of happiness I'd get without all the materialistic things attached.

During one of the last games I had with Coach Crowe, I told him I was in Lindon and smiled when he asked, "You'd give up a free college and a successful football career all for one girl?"

The amount of confidence I had when I replied that night was the same amount I had the day of graduation with the ring box sitting heavy in the pocket of my gown.

I'd been so sure when I told Coach Crowe, "Nah, not for one girl, just for the girl."

Because that girl was going to say yes.

I wonder what I would have done if I knew how wrong I was back then. Would I have attended a different school? Traveled and played somewhere else for a while before coming home to work at the store? I don't know.

I never will.

"Dude, watch it!" DJ—Daniel Bridges Junior—calls out, cringing as the football we've been tossing back and forth nearly collides with me. The golden-haired boy with major golden retriever energy used to be my teammate on Lindon U's football team in undergrad. Unlike me, the receiver currently jogging over to me wanted to go pro. If it hadn't been for a shoulder injury, he might have tried. "You good? One second you were the next you were spaced. What's up?"

I pick up the ball and tuck it under my arm, shaking my head. "Just a little." "Bull," he counters, stealing the ball and spinning it on his finger. "You chug two huge cups of coffee from Bea's, and we both know she's got it strong. There's no way you're still tired after that."

All right, so I did caffeinate pretty hard this morning when I met Matthew Clearwater, another former teammate, at Bea's Bakery. I could have stayed long, but I downed way more coffee than my heart can probably handle in less than an hour and then went to the hospital to see Dad before I took my shift at the hardware store.

"Dad had an episode this morning," I murmur, blowing out a long sigh and gripping the back of my neck. "He started talking about how he didn't want to miss any of my games. I guess he forgot I graduated already and was me thinking about how things should have been. At the beginning of the

king at I had a healthy dad and an amazing girlfriend who I bought a ri  
ched. Everything was good. Now...”

my life DJ is one of my best friends, but I feel weird talking about Raine  
ride to know he and his girlfriend, Skylar, still talk to her. It isn't like  
anything bad to say. I would never make them pick sides, knowi  
ie same doesn't have a lot of friends outside the circle we'd formed together.

7 in the He sighs, gripping the ball in his hands and nodding once with  
expression molded across his face. “I get it, man. Shit hasn't been e  
All for you lately, but dwelling on that stuff isn't going to help you now.”

Just because that's the truth doesn't mean it's any easier to acco  
When I told Dad I wasn't on the football team anymore, he  
k then, threatening to call the coach thinking I'd been kicked off. “You're t  
football that goddamn team has. Give me his number.”

I don't It took twenty minutes for him to remember that I graduated. That  
to leave that life behind.

Mom tried to hide the glassiness in her eyes as she watched th  
g when unfold, but I saw it long before she left to get coffee from the cafeter  
y face. she actually likes the overpriced sludge they serve.

be my Swiping a palm over my jaw, I shake my head and glance  
ie wide apartment building that gives me some semblance of peace when I  
en for a buried at the store, hospital, or school.

re here, The red house was converted into four different apartments that  
Yager—the owner, contractor, and landlord—used Anders Harc  
t tired.” supplies for. I helped him order everything he needed and would occas  
“I saw even go over to help on smaller projects in between all my  
e makes responsibilities. When the building was finished, Stan offered me  
price on one of the units. He even lowered the monthly rent as lo  
DJ and shovel in the winter and mow the lawn in the summer.

ouldn't The apartment isn't much, but it's the one space not riddled with  
handle memories that suffocate me. I've been able to make new ones here  
ook my moved from the football house after graduation.

“Have you heard from her?” DJ asks, bringing my attention back  
g breath When I don't answer right away, he asks, “Have you heard from Raine  
e didn't Lips twitching, I shake my head. “Not since I wished her a  
7. It got birthday.”

re year, I may have looked her up online a few times, but she rarely posts.

ng for. of us are big on social media, but we get tagged a lot by people w

Which is how I know she's been staying with her aunt Tiffany at the  
when I in Radcliff and going to bonfires a few times a week with the group v  
I have to hang out with all the time. Does she see the way Chris looks at her i  
ing she photos? Did she do anything about it now that we're not together?

I'd torture myself with every photo, reading through the comment  
1 a sad how good she looks—how *happy* she looks—but I seem to be the only  
easy for who sees that her smile doesn't actually meet her eyes. I don't kn

should be happy about that or not. It isn't that I want her to be mis  
mplish. much less be the reason for it, but it means that we feel the same.

started Neither of us are okay, or we wouldn't be here. Misery loves co  
he best after all.

Clearing my throat, I brush it off. Brush *her* off the way I need to  
I chose you said, I can't dwell on that shit. I've got a date with Emma  
anyway. We're checking out that new brewery that opened. They're  
e scene half-priced drinks."

ia, as if There's a slight change in DJ's face that has my head cocking. He  
say anything before he tries looking neutral again, but he's never b  
at the best at hiding what's on his mind.

I'm not "What?" I press knowingly. "Just say it."

A sheepish smile curves his lips. "I guess I'm wondering how thi  
Stanley going with Emma. It's obvious that you're not over Raine. How could  
I aware' after all these years together? I want you to be happy, bro, but I don't l  
sionally this is the best idea. There's nothing wrong with taking a little break fi  
7 other dating scene."

a good Maybe I shouldn't have asked. "Emma is a good person."

ng as I "I don't doubt it. Anybody you give your attention to must l  
answers easily. "But even if somebody is a good person doesn't mean  
a ton of good for *you*. It hasn't been that long. Jumping into something might  
since I the best idea."

I nod. "You're right, but I like her. It isn't like I'm going to get  
to him. with anybody right away. She makes things easier. That's all that mat  
:?" now."

happy I can tell DJ doesn't agree with me, but he doesn't say so.

"Thank you," I tell him, despite our opposite stances on this. "Fo  
Neither my friend."

who are. His smile eases. "You don't have to thank me for that. You've got  
your cabinpeople on your side, Caleb. We've got your back."

we've used That's the thing about breakups. There are always sides people  
in those but I don't want that for either of us. I'd like to think there's a reality  
we can coexist with the same people, especially since she'll be back s  
s about graduate school.

person Easier said than done though.

ow if I  
serable,



company EMMA HASN'T STOPPED squirming since we were seated thirty minutes  
the beady-eyed host, nor did she eat her food when it was deliver  
). "Like fingers have grazed my burger to assemble it, but her distance I  
tonight appetite waning.

is doing "What's wrong?" I finally ask, knee bouncing under the table. M  
goes to Dad.

doesn't We've agreed not to talk about him and his diagnosis when we're  
een the if she knows something about him, I want to know now and figure out  
tell Mom later.

Her eyes are timid as they peek up to meet mine through the thick  
ngs are she's coated with makeup. She always wears some at the hospit  
you be nothing like tonight. I would have had to be blind to see what kin  
know if heartbreaker she is in the red shade of lipstick that makes her lips loo  
rom the and the dark liner that emphasizes her moonlike eyes.

*Ethereal* is how Dad once described her.

She carefully sets down the fry that she's been playing with for t  
be," he few minutes and leans back in her chair. "I think maybe we should call  
they're

My brows pinch as I examine her plate to see if there's something  
not be with the food. "Is the burger not cooked right? I can ask them to bring  
new—"

serious "I don't mean dinner, Caleb," Emma tells me, lips quivering. "I m  
ters for Or whatever it is we're trying to be. What I'm trying to say is that I th  
and I should call it quits."

I sit back in my chair and feel my shoulders tense at the suggestic  
or being brought up before. I haven't exactly been model boyfriend materia



a lot of haven't left her on read or bailed on plans since the last time. I've been with her. Honest about mostly everything. I told her about Raine choosing to break up after graduation. I told her about Raine's uncertainty. I don't know where to go or where to know that it wasn't me, because I spent weeks on end wondering how it had been. But I saw the skepticism in her eyes that day.

Maybe it matched mine.

In hindsight, how could anyone get over someone they claimed to love of their life so quickly? I'd like Raine to answer that question for me. I stop staying up at night trying to figure it out.

After a few seconds of staring at the burger in front of me, I lift my head to hers and say, "I'm sorry if I did something."

It doesn't feel like enough, but there's nothing else I could say to make her feel any better for not trying harder. I'd like to think if things weren't the way they are, maybe I would put more effort in.

Then again, I never would have met Emma if he hadn't gotten me to think I'd take that trade.

"I'm an ass," I admit, scratching the column of my neck. "I know there's probably a guy out there who can give you a lot more attention than I can right now."

She quickly shakes her head. "You're not an ass. Honestly, Caleb, I got so much going on that the last thing you need is to add time with me to your schedule. You should focus on your father and your classes. And your other things. I have work that keeps me busy anyway. It's fine."

I don't believe that. "Is it?"

She closes her mouth and evades my eyes, staring down at her phone. "I know it's a sort of has to be, doesn't it? We're on two different paths right now. We need to focus on ourselves, I think."

Why does that pack a punch? "I see where you're coming from. I don't want this to end. I enjoy spending time with you. You're a great person. And—"

Her palm lifts, facing me as a sad smile takes over her trembling lips. "Please don't. I've heard it before. The 'it's not you, it's me' angle. People always feel the need to tell me I'm an amazing person or that I'm probably a little funny to soften the blow for when they tell me they can't give me the same term even before I've asked for it. I don't need to be complimented. I think you need to figure some things out. Prioritize your family and your

an open That's what I'd do if I were in your shoes."

and me Her tone is delicate, and I know she means every word she says. I've always appreciated how blunt she is when it comes to what she wants. I'm not sure if it makes me feel like a bigger jackass for not figuring out what it is I can offer to the table. "When guys say those things to women, they're not just saying you lines. They just know you're too good for what they can offer."

was the Scraping my hand through my hair, I shake my head when she looks at me so I don't look down at her food. I had Mom chop off the long strands last month before

August heat got to be too much. When Dad's hair slowly started growing back, we went back to looking a lot alike.

Except Dad's face is different than it used to be. Long gone is the jawline I got from him, and in its place is a narrow, sickly bone structure. Dad shows how unwell he really is. His cheeks and eyes are all sunken in. His collarbones and ribs show. He's always been lean, like me, but never sick. I wish.

Dropping my hand onto my lap, I debate what I can say or do. "Can we just...spend time together? Go to dinners, a movie, maybe I can putt again. Do things that are mindless fun. We can call it whatever we want. It doesn't have to be anything more than friendship, although I'd like to see if you've if we're being honest."

Her tongue dips out and wets her bottom lip as contemplation makes her face...otherface. "You make it really hard to say no. It isn't that I don't like you, it's that I'm worried I'll get attached if we continue when we can't truly meet me halfway."

late. "It Who says I can't? "Like you said, I need time. Once I figure out how to compartmentalize some things, it'll be easier for me. For us."

Her eyes stay on her food. "Maybe." "Does that mean she's going to give this a shot? I wouldn't blame her, but I know she says no, but my gut tightens at the thought of her rejecting me.

"I know it's not a lot, but I'm willing to try," I say quietly. She peeks up at me, bottom lip in her mouth with a content expression on her face. Eventually, she nods. "Okay."

Okay. We fall to silence for a moment or two before I finally breathe. "Are we okay then?"

Look, I've never liked hurting anybody's feelings, and despite us not knowing each other well enough, I like Emma. The last thing I want is hard feelings.

between us if this doesn't work out in our favor, especially since we  
years. I've seen each other quite a bit at the hospital.

Which     *Hopefully.*  
can bring    That sour feeling is back.  
feeding     Reality.

              It's heavy, holding me down.  
she stares   Emma picks up another fry and puts on a smile, but it doesn't re-  
fore the eyes like it does when she jokes with her coworkers or talks with her j  
growing or tells me about something she learned over the course of her shift.

              Do I do that to women?  
square     Maybe I should let her walk away.  
sure that    Because if we give each other another chance, I could taint her—c  
in; his her to the girl who walked away.  
ever like    I don't want Emma to leave.  
              But do I really want her to stay?

he Putt-  
e want.  
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between us if this doesn't work out in our favor, especially since we'll be seeing each other quite a bit at the hospital.

*Hopefully.*

That sour feeling is back.

Reality.

It's heavy, holding me down.

Emma picks up another fry and puts on a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes like it does when she jokes with her coworkers or talks with her patients or tells me about something she learned over the course of her shift.

Do I do that to women?

Maybe I should let her walk away.

Because if we give each other another chance, I could taint her—compare her to the girl who walked away.

I don't want Emma to leave.

But do I really want her to stay?

## Chapter Six

# RAINE

ONE THING THAT four years of psychology classes have taught me is to be logical, but another helpful lesson I got from all those stressful classes is that logic doesn't get you very far when it comes to personal matters.

I read somewhere that the heart has reasons for the choices we make that not even rationality can understand.

No amount of college classes can make sense of why we do what we do. That doesn't stop us from trying to make an excuse to justify our decisions.

Which is why I'm staring at the house that started it all, wondering if the thought coming to Radcliff would help me process anything. It suffocates to be surrounded by all the things the younger, dumber version of me left here.

All I can think about while looking at the cute little cabin is the music that was blasting that night. Country, until somebody complained and switched to hip-hop. There was a lot of loud laughter shared among friends who had drunk. Flirty touches as someone passed a joint around the bar. I remember the instant Cody's hand touched mine, I felt butterflies.

I know now that those were warning signals fluttering in my stomach, anxiety telling me he was trouble. To run far, far away from the temptation that led me to follow him inside.

You'd think being an A student means you're smart enough to make the right choices, but clearly being book smart doesn't translate well to a real world else.

"You're not her anymore," I remind myself. Flattening my hand against my stomach, I feel a swarm of emotion that has my nostrils flaring.

I've made a lot of choices here that I can't go back and change, so I can only move forward in life the best way I know how. If that means being the bad guy in somebody else's story, at least they'll get a happily ever after with someone else.

Giving one last look to the house, I turn on my heel and walk down the street to where Chris is staying with his parents. I'd asked if he would take a walk with me, but he never got back. I knew he was avoiding me because he always returned texts within minutes.

I'm not sure he'll answer the door when the first few knocks go unanswered, but then it cracks open and his familiar face appears. He stands there with arched brows as I rub my arm awkwardly.

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urses is  
ake that  
we do.

"I want to apologize about the other night before I leave," I tell him. He leans against the doorjamb of his family's rental house with his arms crossed. It's obvious that he isn't over me running from him because he usually invites me in by now. I'd get to pet his mom's adorable French Bulldog, maybe even get some snacks she made. Her chocolate chip cookies are some of the best I've ever had.

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g why I  
ates me  
me did

Nibbling on the inside of my cheek, I add, "I figured it was best to apologize face-to-face. I didn't mean to embarrass you or anyone else. Howie's. You took me by surprise is all. I didn't think you were going to come back to me."

isic that  
tched it

The subtle scoff he gives me has my lips curling into a frown. It shouldn't have been that surprising. I've always had a crush on you, Caleb. Everybody seemed to know but you. Even Caleb."

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nfire. I

Hearing that name makes my heart hurt, and I doubt it's even true. He never said anything to me about it. "You and I are great friends. I want to ruin it. Plus, I was with Caleb for so long..."

nach—  
rptation

"But you're not now," he points out, voice rattled with irritation. He stands straighter and looks down at me. "What? You've got a thing for people with C names except me?"

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nything

I know he's not referring to just Caleb. "I know you're upset with me, but you're not being fair right now."

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"Why? Because you don't like bringing up *Cody* or what you did to him? I don't get why you'd go after a stranger when you could have just opened your eyes and seen me."

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ing the  
ter with

Why does he have to bring that up now? It's been a long time since the last time we saw each other. "Caleb and I had just started seeing each other. It wasn't until after the summer. Neither was what *Cody* and I did."

Chris rolls his eyes, stepping back and grabbing the door. "Cheating is cheating no matter how you want to justify it. Like you said, Caleb is



reement  
mer. Or



1. "This LINDON'S MAIN STREET always smells like a mixture of the business  
being a offers. The pretty roadway is lined with historic brick buildings, c  
benches, and greenery carefully planted and maintained by the town's  
t, but I society that consists of ten older women with nothing better to do. I  
ature he smell pressed coffee, fresh roses, and something fried that makes my s  
growl.

One Saturday every month, which happens to land on today, the  
street shuts down traffic and invites vendors to come in and sell  
community. The sidewalks are always full of tables from the diners an  
alkway. on the main drag where people sit and talk while people watching. A f  
an to. I market is set up in the square where people can sell their homegrown  
body is and there are always local bands playing on a makeshift stage in the  
couple. of the street for everybody stopping by to buy local.  
need to

Lindon has always been a small community with a big heart. One  
how it many reasons I love it so much here, no matter the mixture of mem  
holds. There are places to go and people to see who are supportive no  
bad for what gossip is spreading. I didn't realize how much I'd miss it until  
om you back this morning.

Looking back at my time in Virginia, I spent way too much tim  
we've because I thought that was what I needed. I'd always been around Ca  
ood, no his friends, so solitude and time to think was what this summer *shou*  
been about. In reality, I used it as a time to avoid every ugly emoti  
which is came at me. Turns out it takes a lot of energy to pretend like you ca  
I know on from the life you always thought you'd have with someone.

"I'm sorry," I'd told Caleb when he opened the ring box. It  
ouch? I beautiful piece of jewelry. Maybe the prettiest I've ever seen. Pl  
elegant, which is perfect for me. Nothing showy or flashy or overdon  
odding. chosen right.

Ever since I saw the white-gold band with the cushion cut d  
'll hear placement, I've had dreams of it on my finger. One night, when I wok  
bed all alone, I had tears in my eyes knowing that he wasn't around ar  
an't go There wouldn't be any more nighttime drives with the radio play.



favorite country songs while holding hands or pit stops at the cream  
Milk Duds blizzards in the summer or winters spent sledding down t  
school's steepest hill until we nearly crashed into the bleachers  
football field.

When Tiffany saw my bloodshot eyes the morning after those me  
hit me like a freight train, I knew I couldn't tell her that I thought I'd  
mistake. She would have told me that I needed to stay strong. *Women  
are better off alone*, she'd told me countless times.

But what even were "women like us"? Miserable ones? Lonely ones  
stubborn for our own good because of our trust issues? I'd like to th  
not as cynical as them, that all their years of talking about the curse m  
wonder if I've internalized my own reflections on love and relationshi  
make sense.

Waving at a few locals who are working their respective booths,  
my way toward the little bakery that has always been my second home  
to the woman who owns it.

Bea squeezes me in a tight hug as soon as I walk in, the yummy su  
spice scents lingering in the air and making me feel at peace. "It's goo  
you, girly," the older woman tells me, pulling back to give me a onc  
clucking her tongue. "You've gotten a tan and lost some weight. I'll  
send you on your way with some of those molasses cookies you  
much. I made Elena help me with a fresh batch this morning before sl  
to school."

"How is Lena doing?" I ask of her teenage granddaughter. She's a  
ball of energy whenever I'm here, and it's hard not to be amused wh  
gets stars in her eyes when some of the university's athletes come in f  
and coffee. She had a huge crush on Caleb for a while that I thoug  
cute, especially when it would make him blush whenever I'd tease hir  
it. How could I blame the girl? He's a six-foot-two, all-American b  
loves his family, football, and...well, me. His passion alone mak  
attractive, but his looks are an easy bonus.

Bea moves around the counter and grabs a Styrofoam to-go cup fr  
stack and then grips one of the coffeepots closest to her. "I didn't thin  
possible, but I swear that child got even sassier since she turned sev  
It's obvious she was sent into my life as karma for all the things I did  
was younger."

ery for I crack a smile. “That bad, huh?”

he high “She’s boy crazy” is all the woman says as she pours coffee into t  
by the then the creamer and six sugars I always include. I don’t know h  
remembers everybody’s orders around here.

emories “She’s young,” I reply, shrugging. I can’t say I was ever boy cra  
made at that’s because my teenage years were spent with one boy. Mostly.

like us Bea waves me off. “I finally spoke to Artie about that space ab  
lounge. I know it’s not ideal for your first office, but it’d be a great s  
es? Too you getting on your feet. And if you think about it, you’d be above the  
ink I’m clientele. Those girls probably need a little counseling.”

ake me The Novelty Lounge, a small strip club that was meant to draw in l  
ps. It’d up college students, caused a huge stir when it first went in. The tov  
petitioning it from officially opening because people were afraid it  
I make Lindon’s reputation. They’re not fooling anyone though. Some of th  
thanks people who started the uproar are seen walking in and out of the glas  
which feature silhouettes of naked women on them.

gar and “I haven’t even started the term yet,” I remind her, watching  
d to see deposits my favorite sweets into a white paper bag. “I’ve got a year of  
re-over, classes, a six-week term in the summer, *and* clinical hours to  
have to certification before I can even entertain where to lay down roots.”

love so “Lay down roots,” she mocks, setting the coffee and bag down in  
re went me. “As if it’s not going to be here. Why else would you be back? Plu

knows all that already. He’s willing to hold the space just for you. He  
lways a complaining that nobody wants to rent it because of the noise. I bet yo  
hen she convince him to do some soundproofing. He could get a disco  
or food materials at—” She visibly stops herself before she says the hardware  
ght was

My ex’s family business was the only source of income I’d had  
n about was fifteen years old. “I don’t even have a job anymore to help me  
joy. He anything. Not an apartment and definitely not an office space, Bea.”

es him We’re quiet for a moment or two before she looks around the  
empty café. “I’m looking for some help around here if you’re intereste  
rom the know I’ll work around your school schedule. That way you wo  
k it was overwhelmed with too much.”

enteen. “I could use some money,” I admit, nudging the floor with the end  
when I flip-flop. My eyes lock on the colorful pedicure I got with Tiffan  
before I left. During the appointment, she told me to choose the red be

was sultry and would get men's attention. I chose green. The same  
the cup, Caleb always said made my eyes pop. "I'm back at home with Mom f  
ow shenow until I figure something else out."

It's not an ideal situation considering I've spent a lot of time out  
azy, but parents' home. I found peace in the chaos of the sorority house I l  
during undergrad because at least I didn't have to deal with my p  
ove the constant bickering. The most I had to listen to was some of my sisters  
start for over men who didn't deserve them or catty arguments over stupid thi  
perfect groceries, clothes, or what charity the car wash funds went toward.

"If you see Artie before I do, can you tell him I appreciate the o  
horned-that he shouldn't hold that space for me? It's going to be a long time  
vn tried I'm ready to start my own practice, and there's bound to be somebody  
'd taint to pay him rent for the space before I ever can. I heard the town is  
ie same revitalization project and got a big grant for it, so that'll pull in b  
s doors owners who are willing to deal with just about anything for the righ  
tag."

as she Bea's eyes give me a thorough study before nodding. "I'll pass it  
regular but I wouldn't be so sure. You know that man has always had a soft s  
get my you and what you want to do."

Artie Fisher is a sweet older man who owns a few different build  
front of Main Street. Some were converted into student housing and others ar  
s, Artie spaces. I know a big reason he's fond of what I want to do is because  
's been his daughter to mental illness a long time ago. He's told me there need  
u could more access to help and resources here. Help I'd love to offer to a  
unt for who needs it.

store. Swallowing, I say, "It's hard to think about the next big step when  
since I seem to handle the little ones right now."

afford She offers me a comforting smile. "I have no doubt that you'll f  
out. You're in a rough place, but it's bound to get better so long as y  
mostly the effort in."

ed. You Pulling out a five-dollar bill and stuffing it into the tip jar, I say, "  
on't beright. I'll send you my class schedule so we can work around it. I mig  
be able to work about three days a week because I've packed on a lot  
l of my classes, but..."

y right "Don't worry about it. Elena is trying to save up for her own car, s  
cause it been taking on as many shifts as she can when she's out of school

figure it out.”

“Thanks, Bea,” I tell her, grabbing the items she refuses to let me and heading toward the door.

I start to push it open when I hear, “He misses you. I wouldn’t lived in anything just yet. It may be hard for the two of you but not impossible.

Not sure what to say, I let the door slowly close again until I’m still crying the speckled water stains on the glass.

She adds, “Go easy on him. That boy has been through it lately, and not sure how much more he can handle. Everybody breaks eventually but matter how strong they pretend to be for everybody else.”

I pause, feeling my stomach drop as I turn to face her. “What willing mean? What happened?”

She frowns at the question before slowly shaking her head. I can see the expression on her face when she replies with a somber, “Oh, girl it really have no idea, do you?”

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I can’t

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you put

‘You’re  
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of grad

so she’s  
. We’ll

figure it out.”

“Thanks, Bea,” I tell her, grabbing the items she refuses to let me pay for and heading toward the door.

I start to push it open when I hear, “He misses you. I wouldn’t assume anything just yet. It may be hard for the two of you but not impossible.”

Not sure what to say, I let the door slowly close again until I’m staring at the speckled water stains on the glass.

She adds, “Go easy on him. That boy has been through it lately, and I’m not sure how much more he can handle. Everybody breaks eventually, no matter how strong they pretend to be for everybody else.”

I pause, feeling my stomach drop as I turn to face her. “What do you mean? What happened?”

She frowns at the question before slowly shaking her head. I can’t read the expression on her face when she replies with a somber, “Oh, girly. You really have no idea, do you?”

## Chapter Seven

# RAINE

THE HARDWARE STORE looks so much bigger now that I'm standing in it. I've been debating for five minutes on whether I have the guts to go in, knowing who's in there. I saw the profile of his face as he he older woman grab a light bulb from the top shelf of aisle eight.

How could I *not* go in though? Caleb's family was like a second me basically my whole adolescent life. They took me in as their own accepted me even before I started dating their son. His mom would show home with leftovers, and his dad taught me how to change a tire and the oil in my car.

*His dad.*

My stomach dips at the thought of the terrible news Bea shared, pushing me forward until I'm opening the door and listening to the familiar clatter of the bell announcing a new customer's arrival.

I freeze when I walk far enough in to be met by the deep brown eyes of the boy behind the counter. They're not as warm as usual but tired. I've never seen them look this dull when he tried pulling two all-nighters in to help me study for my finals while also trying to prepare for his. He was sick, almost slept through his first exam, but managed to get through one of the highest grades in his class.

My throat tightens with emotion as I slowly walk forward, feet dipping out each step until I'm mere inches away from the counter where Caleb is standing stone-still.

"I had no idea," I whisper.

No "Hi."

No "How are you?"

That's a trivial question, and there's no way he'd answer me honestly. *Fine* is the word I'm sure I'd hear escape those full lips of his that I could map out with my fingertip whenever we were lying together.

I fiddle with my hands, unsure of what to say or do. Breakup be d  
I want to walk around the counter and give him a tight hug—the tight  
ever given. It’s what he’s always done whenever something happen  
my family.

But I can’t get myself to move.

Not forward.

Not back.

front of Caleb asks, “When did you get back into town?”

actually Civil conversation.

pped an It’s...awkward. Thick.

“This morning.”

l one to He simply nods.

wn and “Caleb—”

end me “I can’t do this right now, Raine” is what he tells me, staring at the  
l check on the counter. He’s never cut me off before, but I get it. I do. It only  
me want to hug him more.

I tuck my hands into the pockets of my jeans, looking around th  
pushing It’s just us. No other customers or workers. I bet his mom is at the l  
ime of with his dad.

“I’m sorry.”

eyes of We both know the apology is for more than just his father’s hea  
ve only for everything. All the years. All the hurt. Everything I threw away.  
n a row past, the present, and whatever the future holds.

He got Caleb, for once, says nothing to me.

it with It’s bittersweet.

ragging Emotion crams into my throat, choking me. I can’t swallow. Can  
Caleb is breathe. My eyes water as I make a single decision. “I had so much t  
about this summer and none of it helped like I thought it would.  
lonelier than I thought it’d be.”

Once again, he’s silent.

“I want you to know how sorry I am for walking away. I don’t kno  
I’m doing or where I’m going in life anymore. I’m just...” He does  
this pointless rambling when the last thing I should do is to make thi  
me. “I’m just sorry. You’ve gone through a lot, and you don’t deserve  
honestly. used to

His dark eyes glaze before his lips press into a solid line. If he w  
say anything, he’s not allowing himself to. Not that I blame him.

ammed, away a lot of years together.

est I've The only thing I can think to do is walk around the counter, stop  
ed with front of him, and hesitate for only a second before wrapping my arms  
his tense torso.

He's also lost weight. He was lean before thanks to his position  
football team, but now I can feel bones that used to have a little more  
on them that are no longer padded.

Two broken people.

I don't expect him to do anything.

Not hug me back.

Not say a word.

I only want him to know I care, no matter in what capacity. Because  
and I always will, no matter how conflicted I am about how or why  
e laptop ended.

r makes So when he looks down at me, the few inches of difference betw  
making his gaze feel that much harder on my face as we stare at each  
e store. don't expect him to bend down and kiss me. Or to back me into the c  
ospital. And I definitely don't expect him to pull me in to him so close our bo  
melded together, until I feel everything.

*Everything.*

lth. It's I gasp into his mouth when he picks me up by my hips and sets r  
For the the countertop. On top of the paperwork, receipts, and scribbled-on in  
sheets he's obviously been working on for a while.

We kiss for what feels like hours when it's more like seconds. Hi  
are on me, mine on him, and I realize this may be what he needs.

l barely I don't stop him when he walks away.

o think Don't say a word when he locks the front door and flips the OPEN  
It was CLOSED.

Don't voice my concerns when he walks back over to me, spre  
legs, and moves between them with an obvious intention.

w what He needs this.

i't need So I'll give it to him.

s about Anything for Caleb.

it." It's me who kisses him again.

wants to It's me who tugs on his shirt.

I threw



But it's him who groans, popping the button on my pants and right indown the zipper before reminding me exactly how good he is with his around Not a single word is uttered as we shed the bottom layers of our ci devour each other's mouths, and prepare each other for what's a on thehappen.

muscle I bite my bottom lip when he guides himself to my entran hesitating once before pushing in until he's fully seated.

And it feels like no time has passed at all.

The only noise that fills the empty hardware store is the sound heavy panting and the noises coming from me every single time he into me.

se I do, There's no praise.

7 things No gentle coaxing.

No dirty talk.

veen us Just sex.

other, I It's never been just sex with us.

ounter. And when he's close, I pull him into me and hold him there, hugg dies arearms tightly around his neck until he makes a distressed noise an inside me until he's coming.

We stay like that.

ne onto For one second.

ventory Two.

Five.

s hands After about thirty, he pulls out, leans his forehead against mi shakes his head. I don't know what to say when he offers me a paper t clean up with or what to do when he walks into the back room after fa sign tohis jeans and clenching the back of his neck without so much as a look in my direction.

ads my So I do the only thing I know how to.

I gather what little is left of my pride, readjust my clothing, an away.

But it's him who groans, popping the button on my pants and sliding down the zipper before reminding me exactly how good he is with his hands.

Not a single word is uttered as we shed the bottom layers of our clothing, devour each other's mouths, and prepare each other for what's about to happen.

I bite my bottom lip when he guides himself to my entrance, not hesitating once before pushing in until he's fully seated.

And it feels like no time has passed at all.

The only noise that fills the empty hardware store is the sound of our heavy panting and the noises coming from me every single time he pumps into me.

There's no praise.

No gentle coaxing.

No dirty talk.

Just sex.

It's never been just sex with us.

And when he's close, I pull him into me and hold him there, hugging my arms tightly around his neck until he makes a distressed noise and jerks inside me until he's coming.

We stay like that.

For one second.

Two.

Five.

After about thirty, he pulls out, leans his forehead against mine, and shakes his head. I don't know what to say when he offers me a paper towel to clean up with or what to do when he walks into the back room after fastening his jeans and clenching the back of his neck without so much as a second look in my direction.

So I do the only thing I know how to.

I gather what little is left of my pride, readjust my clothing, and walk away.

## Chapter Eight

# CALEB

I TOSS THE football back to DJ, who's grinning at me after I spilled my drink on him. "I don't see what the big deal is," he tells me.

My mood, which hasn't been stable in months anyway, hasn't been right ever since Raine showed back up in town. It's been hard not to scroll through her social media pages every day to see where she is, what she's up to, or if she's seeing somebody else. I've told myself the only reason that she ended our relationship was because she wasn't sure she wanted to spend the rest of her life with me. She must have been confused since there was nothing to compare our relationship to. What else could she have been confused about?

It doesn't make it easier, but at least it's a reason I can let myself off the hook because it wasn't me or something I did.

As shitty as it is, Dad's condition has helped distract me from thinking about too much time in my ex-girlfriend and her whereabouts or how good it would be to be inside her again.

"We broke up" is how I reply, voice monotone at the obvious reminder to catch the ball he throws at me, gripping the sides and staring a little too long at it. DJ told me I was always calmer whenever we played, which is weird to be out here when I have better places to be, but this doesn't seem to be any different. "I shouldn't have had sex with her, especially not like that. It was a mistake."

I slept like shit last night thinking about what I did, replaying how I acted in the back office like a fucking coward until I heard Raine leave. I don't know if it was what she said that led me to making a move or if it was my ego or just me getting the better of me. I was pissed off because of life, because of my dad, because of how hard I'm struggling with school, and not even her apology made me feel better. If anything, it made me angrier—more confused. Because I don't know if I can believe it.

Hearing her say she's sorry doesn't really mean anything if it doesn't change anything. Yet I still made a move so I could feel something other than

bitterness.

All it did was remind me that I'm still not over her, which makes even shittier for trying so hard to convince Emma to give me a second Raine touched me, I couldn't think of anybody else. Only her.

DJ's laugh causes me to lift my gaze and glare in his direction. you hooked up with an ex. We've literally all been there. Be re yourself. It's only been a few months, and you were together for Addicts always go back to their fixes at least once before they finally up. Hell, I'd say you're doing pretty good."

My nostrils twitch as I throw the ball at him with more force than quite necessary. "Don't compare those situations. She's not my drug. She's not *What the hell is she?*

When it's obvious I'm in no mood for messing around, DJ sighs heartedly. "Look, man. You know I like Raine. I like you too. It's hard to figure out the right things to say because I know you're hurting, and at the heart-to-heart shit. But don't beat yourself up over this. It happens."

The only thing you can do now is move forward. You have to focus on some point. Not Raine. Not Emma. You've got bigger fish to fry right now."

Knowing he's right, I shake my head and roll my shoulders. "When will you become so wise? It's a little freaky, dude."

He grins. "It's all these books Sky is having me read. Speaking of which, you should seriously read some of these. Romance novels are off the charts, man. Best sex of my life after she reads those fuckers because they give her ideas."

The last thing I want to think about right now is sex. Or somebody's relationship given the raw status of mine. Or lack thereof.

Plus, I like Skylar Allen—DJ's girlfriend. They went through a lot together, and I'm happy he found somebody who makes him smile so much. Even if it's a little grating sometimes when that lovey-dovey lights up his face whenever he talks about her.

But I've been there before.

"Come on," I tell him, sighing and nodding toward my apartment. "The game is going to start soon, and I want to get a couple of things done beforehand."

He follows me inside the renovated two-bedroom apartment. "As we're not cheering on those fucking pussies at Penn State. I'm sick of

them all over the damn news when there are players who should be highlighted for their skills and not for the bullshit their teammates wrote about. Theof.”

DJ has been extra testy ever since one of the Penn State coaches admitted to throwing away some concerning complaints filed against their best player. “Dude, I don’t blame the guy. Coaches tend to do a little more than they should when their winning streaks are at stake, something Lindon University saw fit to do with our former coach, Coach Pearce. DJ spearheaded his removal last semester, which left the school scrambling to rebuild their coaching staff before the new season started.

he’s...” “Alabama is playing against them,” I say. We’ve always rooted for the Crimson Tide anyway, but I know it’s going to be an intense game this year.

As half-the comments DJ is bound to make against Penn. “Anyway, are you really trying the semester?” I ask, knowing we have a lot of shared classes this year. “I suck we’re both studying business for our MBAs. I walk over to the fridge and grab a couple of beers for us, setting one down in front of him. “Because you at not, that’s for damn sure.”

now.” “Are any of us?” he comments, lifting a shoulder in dismissal. “Do you remember when I did an internship for Sky’s dad this summer made me realize how much help I need. I signed up for Alexander’s marketing class this semester, hoping it would be a freaky, be an easy A after all the marketing promotions I worked on.”

fucking I pull out my phone and frown when I see a new email from my professor. She says one of the classes I need is full. Grumbling to myself, I glance at the list of available courses she attached and pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fucking hell, it’s the third fucking class I can’t get into. One of them is only offered once every two years.”

not to be DJ’s eyebrows arch up at my hostile tone. “Are you on the waiting list? How the hell did you damn managed to get into one of my undergrad courses when people can’t even get in by looking during the first couple of weeks.”

I shake my head in answer.

“Well, even if you don’t get in, you’ll have the chance to waitlist for it. Theof offered next. You may not even need to wait two years. Professors usually have a few spots done classes all the time.”

Knee bouncing as I sit at the breakfast nook, I go through the rest of the day reading long emails before checking my final grades from my summer courses and seeing at the borderline passing marks. There goes my 3.0 GPA.

ould be “I don’t know what’s going to happen in two years, DJ. I don’t  
ere partknow what’s going to happen tomorrow. I worked my ass off to do  
and get my MBA sooner, but then the shit with Dad...”

mitted He comes up beside me, pulling out the only other stool I have, and  
players.down. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. You know what you  
d whendo, Cal. Running the store is in your blood. Give yourself some br  
rsthandroom instead of burning yourself out. It isn’t like there’s a rush to g  
val lastdegree, anyway.”

ig staff I’m quiet as I crack the top open on the beer and take a swig. “I ju  
things were back to normal.”

ted for That’s when he asks a question I’ve never really thought about  
anks to “What even is normal?”

ady for And the more I think about it, the more I have no fucking idea.

ar since

lge and

use I’m



MOM OPENS THE door of their house for me with a huge smile on her  
one I haven’t seen in a long time. It’s odd that the first thing I  
ing the concerned, since her happiness is typically a sign that something go  
p I still happened for once. It’s the way her eyes gleam as she ushers me in t  
ing it’ll me cautious at best.

adviser Before I can even ask, Mom claps her hands together once and say  
e at the boys came by to see your father today, and they told him they saw  
e. “This leaving the hardware store.”

d every She stares at me expectantly, as if I’m supposed to confirm or den  
claim.

g list? I *The boys* are a few guys who work at the town barn. When they’re  
ropped plowing in the winters or working on whatever overpriced project Lin  
approved for in the summer, they’re in everybody’s business. It’s r  
can do anything without one of them ratting you out. Once, I got a sp  
ren it’s ticket and one of the town boys saw me and tattled to my dad. He ca  
pick up not even two hours later asking how fast I was going and then lectured  
respecting the speed limits, especially near the elementary school when  
t of my pulled over.

l cringe Walking over to the armchair where my parents’ elderly basset

It's even Frank, is curled up, I fuss over the graying mutt before turning to my  
able up "There's nothing to tell," I inform her, watching her shoulders  
fraction. "She didn't know about Dad, so she came to apologize."

and sits I'm not quite sure *how* she could have been in the dark about Dad  
need to long. People were talking about how sick he looked long before  
eatings summertime. He'd brushed them and our suggestion to go to the doctor  
get your until it was too late. By the time he was diagnosed in May, not even  
weeks after my graduation, it was a whirlwind of bad news. He hadn't  
ist wish done chemo before the specialists saw that the cancer was spreading.

Raine might not have been around this summer, but her family  
before. There was no way they didn't know.

I've never been one to share personal details about my relationship  
either of my parents, so I'm not about to start now. Mom doesn't  
know what happened between us at the store to get her hopes up that  
will be a reunion anytime soon. That's something I plan on taking  
grave with me, especially because I know the woman who's watching  
face— with sad eyes would scold me if she found out how I basically used Frank  
feel is to distract myself from feeling something other than sadness.

What I'll never understand is why the only woman I've ever loved  
Raine always wants to make everybody happy, but she shouldn't have  
go to those lengths that day. Did she want to because she knew I needed  
s, "The Or because she missed me too?"

And why am I so focused on an answer when I should just let it go  
got Emma. I shouldn't have had sex with Raine for a lot of reasons  
especially because of the nurse I'm supposed to see tomorrow night  
ay their movie. What's worse, I don't want to tell her about my indiscretion.

"What's wrong, Caleb?" Mom asks, walking over and brushing my hair  
not out "Did you two talk? Did you fight? Did you discuss—"

"It's not important," I tell her, walking past Dad's favorite recliner  
don't got hasn't been used since he was hospitalized. Sitting on the end of the couch  
are you blow out a heavy breath. "I know you've always been team Raine,  
eeding much has happened, Mom. Yes, she stopped by. Yes, we spoke. She  
lled me some shit that I'm still processing. But that's it. Please don't go making  
l me on anything in your head about us getting back together. That's the last  
e I was can focus on right now."

Her frown deepens as she stoops, petting between Frank's big,

mother.ears. Mom knows even less than I do about why my relationship ended. How could she? It was hard to explain the reason Raine told me no when I truly understand myself. “I will *always* be team Caleb. Do I like Raine for this? I loved her like a daughter and am still fond of her because she’s more the person. I will never understand how things went down the way they did between you two because you’re one of a kind, baby boy. Any girl would be lucky to have such a sweet, kindhearted man in her life. But I also know it wasn’t even Raine’s choice must not have been an easy one for her to make because it was always clear that you two loved each other very much.”

ly was. This conversation isn’t making me feel any better, which was why I’m here—to be around one of the people who has always been in my corner. My parents have been my ride-or-die my whole life, and even just sitting with them and doing nothing with them brings me the kind of peace I need. Now I’m stuck at there ever.

g to the Mom doesn’t stop there. She walks over and sits down beside me, taking my hand. “She’s always been a logical girl, but sometimes reason gets in the way of what the heart wants. Not that you asked, but just because it didn’t go well doesn’t mean they still can’t. But if that’s not what you want, let me. I’ll support you. I’ll be on your side no matter what, as long as you’re not in the end. Okay?”

eded it? Raine has always analyzed everything in life, including us. I never thought twice about it because she’s studying to become a psychologist. I’ve made sense that she wants to dissect how people act and think.

ns, but But maybe logic is actually the downfall in relationships. If you fall off the deep end because you trust someone fully, then what’s the point? This whole time, I thought Raine and I trusted each other with our arms. I wanted to make it official, to make it to the end, yet here we are.

Apparently, I was fucking wrong.

ner that Staring at the floor, I murmur, “Okay.”

ouch, I Mom pats my hand before reaching for the TV remote. “By the way, but your father told me to pass along that the security cameras in the store need updating. It seems they only work half of the time, and he told me you’re going to check them out because of some strange footage on them.”

thing I My body locks up at what must have been recorded there recently. *Jesus Christ.*

floppy My voice is raspy when I force out a strangled “Got it.”



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## Chapter Nine

# RAINE

THE BAKERY FEELS different from the other side of the counter intimidating. “It’s not that hard,” Elena, Bea’s granddaughter, tells me and shows me how to make the next latte with a slick grin on her face. “I’ll mess up a bunch at first, but I’m sure people won’t care too much since everyone in the town likes you.”

*Great.* A seventeen year-old is reassuring me that I’ll get pity and nothing else at my new job. “I never thought about what all went into making a drink,” I admit sheepishly, already tired from my first full week of class.

The past five days have been filled with paranoia walking around this familiar campus, all because I’m doing it on my own for the first time without Caleb or the people I hung out with by my side. The girls I lived with at the sorority house have all gone their separate ways, not that I was particularly close with any of them. One thing I’ve been dreading all semester is what it would be like coming back knowing most of the people in my social circle were people Caleb was friends with: guys from the tennis team, their girlfriends or people he made friends with from his classes. I don’t intend to rely so heavily on his extroverted nature to meet people, but I’ve

Now, I have no idea who’s in my corner. I don’t even know if I’ll get a despite our spontaneous hookup.

Sighing, I refocus on the cheat sheet by the counter to help guide me on how to make each drink that the bakery offers, which I have a feeling I’ll need to study if I’m going to get this right. I’m usually not irritated so much at myself for getting something wrong, but my emotions have been all over everywhere lately thanks to the stress of school, living back at home and trying to figure out a new routine for myself. A routine *without* the help of Caleb haven’t been able to stop thinking about since I walked out of the hardware store with my dignity dragging on the sidewalk behind me.

I’m not sure if regret is what I’ve been feeling about our slipup, but I

I've never regretted a single moment with Caleb before. But the emptiness nestled into my chest where my heart should be. That black the only thing I can focus on, and if nothing else, I hope that what took away from whatever darkness has been surrounding him.

Elena snickers. "Maybe we'll just have you get the food orders ready they take is either heating them up or shoving them into a bag. Easy Ivy first started working here, she almost killed somebody who had a allergy by accidently adding a hazelnut creamer to their coffee. So as you avoid that, you'll be fine."

Ivy Underwood is dating the new Giants tight end, Aiden Griffith both went to Lindon before he dropped out to start his professional with the NFL and she followed. I sort of miss the snarky girl whose s basically filling. It was funny to watch her banter with people and keep fucks-given attitude with anybody who tried giving her flak. She was the few people who could make the broody football player smile, even she pretended she was annoyed with him.

Bea walks out from the back holding a tray of freshly made peanut cookies with peanut butter cups baked into them. It makes my mouth watch her set the tray down on the counter and open the display case trying to psych out our trainee," she scolds the younger girl beside me. Bea glances at me from over her shoulder. "Help me put these away don't listen to Elena. Ivy wasn't *that* bad. She caught on fast, just like you'll do. Not that she ever admitted it, but she took a picture of our sheet and took it home with her to study. Within two days, she'd memorized everything there was to make around here without needing to be told to

I smile at that. "Do you hear from her or Aiden at all?"

Bea nods as we empty the tray and make sure the baked goods are up in the glass case. "They visit whenever they're in town, and Ivy sends postcards with pictures every so often. The last one I got is hanging right there." Her finger points toward the corkboard where pictures, letters other papers are hanging by tacks. "Damn cute couple, those two. Ain't seen Aiden smile so wide until he was around her."

So I'm not the only one who noticed. I'm smacked with not thinking about what it was like being around those two back when everything seemed so much less complicated.

"Let him in, Elena," I hear Bea say as I stare absently at the c

re's anbrownies, and muffins ready for the day. "He always gets his coffee hole isbefore heading to the store."

we did My stomach dips as I look up, finding Caleb walking through the door. We haven't seen each other or talked since that day at the store. All he knows I'm staring, his eyes move from Elena to me, stalling. When entrance of the café. *Is he going to walk out?*

tree nut The intrusive thought buries its claws in my mind as I see him long asbefore finally snapping out of whatever thought he was having and v toward the counter. My chest tightens the closer he gets, and sud h. Theyremember every single sensation he brought alive on that store cou l careerused to do homework on once upon a time.

pot I'm My new boss happily says, "I trust you can handle this custom p a no-order hasn't changed, so you'll be fine."

one of *Fine.* Why does it feel like I'm going to have a heart attack then?

n when Caleb stops in front of the cash register that I'm frozen at. "Yo here now?"

it butter He sounds as off as I feel. Fidgeting with the little apron tha vater ashelped me tie around my waist, I nod. "Bea offered me a job the da e. "Stopback to town."

e. Then *The day I saw you at the hardware store.*

y. And Clearing his throat, he dips his chin and grabs his brown leather wa I knowold one of his father's, from his back pocket. "That was nice of her to c

ir cheat *Nice* seems so clinical. I'm not sure what to say right away, norizedawkwardness between us grows. "Yeah..." Watching him pull out wice." dollar bill, I manage to ask, "Same coffee? Regular with eight milks sugar?"

re lined He peeks up at me through his lashes before giving me anothe nds me "Yes." There's a pause before a mumbled "Please."

ght over We stand there exchanging money and change before I handle the rs, andcan feel his eyes on my back as I grab a cup and the coffeepot 't nevercounting out the milk shots. He never liked his coffee too dark an sugar in it because he's never had much of a sweet tooth, unlike me ostalgialways kept a stash of Milk Duds and other sweets in the glove comp. rythingof my car and inside each of my bags to pull out whenever I want them

Once I set the cup down on the counter and tighten the to-go lid ookies,top, I ask, "How is your dad doing?"

early Anybody would want to know, I reason. It's not out of line for me about somebody I saw as family. I still do, even if I have no right.

front Caleb shifts on his feet, wrapping those long, tan fingers around the Styrofoam cup before pulling it toward him. "He's...Dad. Too stupid to act like anything's wrong."

We fall back into silence, save whatever Bea is doing in the kitchen. A rattler hesitates, and a curse sounds as something loud bangs against the floor. A walking water runs and a heavy sigh comes from the older woman giving me a look that says I took too much time with her customer.

enter we I wait for Caleb to say something, watching as his lips part and close, but nothing but tension fills the space between us.

er? His "Hey," I say quickly. "About the other day—"

"Raine, I can't. I just can't." He picks up the coffee, lifts it toward me, and then leaves before I can try bringing anything up.

u work The teenager behind me says, "Damn. That was awkward."

Then I hear a smack, a high-pitched whine, and a grumble as the teen is yanked into the kitchen by her grandmother while I stand defeated by the register with a heaviness in my heart.



allet, an

do." THE KITCHEN OF my childhood home smells like burnt sugar and something else that makes my nose scrunch, causing me to open a window near the sink and examine the mess covering the countertops.

and no "Mom?" I call out cautiously, picking up one of the pans on the stove that has something burnt and black caked on the bottom. "Did somebody burn something and try cooking?"

Setting my backpack down on the table off to the side, I walk into the living room and listen for any sign of life. It isn't like Mom to experiment in the kitchen. That was Dad's thing.

d hates "Mom?" When I hear rustling coming from her tiny craft room, I poke my head in to see her at her sewing machine. "Hey, what happened in the kitchen? It looks like a tornado went off in there."

l. She lifts her head up, removing a pin from where she was holding it in her mouth and placing it into the fabric she's working on. "I didn't even

to ask you come home. I was going to clean up before you got back.”

My eyebrows go up. “Last time you tried cooking, the fire department came and you blamed me for it because you figured they wouldn’t be born to a twelve-year-old for learning how to make her own food.”

Mom laughs. “I forgot about that. It’s a wonder you’re become a potter instead of searching for one.” She pushes back from the dining table. Then removes her tape measure from where it’s draped across her neck. “I was a little trying to make caramel kettle corn. I saw a recipe online that looked good enough to recreate. But then the caramel started burning and the smoke detectors started going off and everything was smoky. I’m surprised Applebee next door didn’t call the fire department on me.”

I’m ninety-nine percent sure he doesn’t have his hearing aids turned on with Elena, most of the time. It must be nice to drown things out without a care in the world. “You should probably soak the pan. That way, it’s easier to clean.”

She frowns. “Maybe we should just get new pans. I mean, we don’t have to be blunt that much anyway, unless eggs count.”

“We do eat a lot of eggs.” “Or maybe,” I propose, following her into the kitchen, “we should learn how to cook so we’re not spending our pay on takeout. We relied on Dad way too much.”

If it wasn’t Dad cooking all our meals, it was Caleb who was making things for me. I got so used to it, I never thought much about the obvious. “I set that I should have started learning years ago.”

Mom scoffs as she picks up the pan and sighs, walking over to the sink and running water over it. “We never relied on your father for anything. We’ve survived fine on our own.”

*Yeah, thanks to the pizza place and Simply Thai.* Not wanting to get into a nod reluctantly. “Yeah, you’re right. Hey, speaking of Dad, did he mention that we are doing lunch tomorrow? I know you saw him yesterday when you met with the lawyers.”

She hums, turning the water off and staring into the sink basin. “I told me you are meeting at the diner.” Shoulders dropping, she turns to me. “I’m glad you two are still spending time together despite all this.”

“What?” “There’s no reason why I wouldn’t. Dad has never treated me badly; it’s the exact opposite, actually. He’d take me on father-daughter dates even when I was often growing up. Mostly mini golfing or out to whatever movie was that I wanted to see. We’d always wind up at the diner after.”

I miss having him around the house, especially because he'd always come late-night snacks with me when neither of us could sleep. Mom would judge us for eating after midnight, so we'd get sneaky. In the long run, I understand they're better off where they are now. In different houses, living and dining alives.

ask and Instead of asking about how things are going between the two of us, "I was and getting forced to hear about God knows what, I gesture toward the bed easypots and pans scattered everywhere. "I think I saw a cooking class smokeoffered at that new test kitchen in town. Maybe we can sign up and attend Mr.mother-daughter day. It could be fun."

Based on the flinch, I'd say she doesn't agree. "I can think of better ways to spend our day, and it's not listening to a pretentious chef tell me how to flip a pancake or season a chicken breast." "I can't cook for breakfast one day before school. I was six. I think I started asking about how rubbery it tasted.

Defeated, I grab my bag and haul it over my shoulder. "It was a checkstought since we haven't spent much time together lately."

Mom had briefly apologized for missing my birthday by order makingdinner the night I got home. Then she got a call from a client and had us skillback to work, so we barely saw each other for my make-up celebration.

Maybe it would have upset me more if Bea hadn't made my favorite cake sinkfor my first shift, even putting the number twenty-three in icing on everything.cookie.

I start walking toward my room when Mom stops me. "I'm not there,sweetie. I've been picking up as much work as possible to make ends meet.Let's order dinner from your favorite Chinese place and then watch a movie together.You can choose which one."

Biting my tongue, I slowly nod at the typical night we have to deal with. Yes, heShe'll be on her phone most of the time until she decides to go to bed, leaving me to clean up and sit in silence by myself.

But just like those other times, I choose not to say a thing, because I know that's all the time I get with her, I'll take it.

very so "Sure, Mom. I'd like that."  
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## Chapter Ten

# CALEB

THE FIRST FEW weeks of the semester fly by faster than I anticipated, considering my life is a stream of constant school assignments, work, and hospital visits. Each day blends into the next, with the same exhaustion, caffeine addiction, and heavy anxiety weighing on me that just gets worse.

Before I know it, August turns into September and the crisp air from the fall is the only thing that seems to give me a boost of energy when exhaustion weighs me down.

That and coffee, which I haven't gotten as often from Bea's because of the chickenshit. Ever since I discovered Raine works there, I've been hesitating to go at all, which means making shitty coffee in the cheap machine I bought for my apartment. It hardly hits the spot like the bakery's dark roast, but that's one of those things I don't want to deal with—my mixed feelings for my ex-girlfriend are one of them.

Almost as if I manifest it, a cup of coffee is set on the store counter in front of the textbook I'm reading. Matthew Clearwater, another one of my former teammates, is standing there with the same look most of my ex-girlfriends have been giving me lately. "Dude, you need to stop."

*Stop.* I don't know what that word even means anymore. "Stop trying to pass grad school? Trying to keep a roof over my mother's head? Living?"

Matt's lips twitch downward at my melodramatic reply before he looks at the coffee and pulls my textbook away. "Let's be real, man. You're not doing any studying when you've gotten, what, a few hours of sleep at best? DJ suddenly dozed off in business economics the other day and it took him kicking him awake before you came to."

I'd spent the night before with Dad because he wasn't doing so hot at work. Nurses normally don't let people stick around after visiting hours, but

was working and managed to convince her shift supervisor to let me long as I was quiet and out of the way. I woke up with a blanket draped over me that definitely wasn't there when I fell asleep and a second tray with my name on a piece of paper in Emma's handwriting.

Something she wouldn't have done if I'd told her what happened at the hardware store. Not that I wasn't tempted to rip the Band-Aid off a bandage losing her too. She deserves better than the half-assed excuses and the energy I give her.

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She knows that.

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"Mom told me I should talk to my adviser about taking a leave of absence," I murmur, scrubbing my tired eyelids. "Dad got talked into palliative care and hospice yesterday by his oncologist and the team I've been working with him. It was..." No words can describe the mood in the room when that conversation was brought up. I still don't think any of the information they offered has really soaked in.

Matt shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Cal. I don't think your mom is going to be able to take a few weeks off, you can make it up. Maybe you could talk to your professors about trying to line up some work and make sure you don't fall behind if you want to come back."

Taking the coffee he brought me, I pull back the plastic tab and take a long sip of the liquid that I have a feeling Raine made, based on the taste on the side of the cup. "I haven't really had time to think about my options."

It's not entirely true. I've thought about taking a break from school, but I've never given up on anything. Dad taught me better than that.

"Dad is thinking about coming home and having a team of nurses settle him in where he's comfortable. He doesn't want to be in the hospital anymore."

"Can't say I blame him," my friend remarks, voice quiet. I remember when Matt was hospitalized freshman year with a burst appendix that led to a bad infection, so he was stuck at the hospital. The only thing that kept him through it were the cute nurses who entertained his cheesy flirting during his period of his stay. He asks, "What does your mom think about all this? My aunt said she's sad she doesn't see her at their Tuesday book club meetings anymore, but she isn't sure if she should drop by the house to say

stay so everything that is going on.”

ed over Mom could use the company, but I get why people might be h  
of food Nobody knows what to say to us anymore. If it’s not “sorry,” it’s not  
all because they’re afraid of saying the wrong thing. “When they  
d at the giving us options about how to move forward, Mom looked a little  
nd risk know she wants him at home, but I can tell there’s something on he  
nd low about it that she’s not saying.”

His eyebrows go up, as if to say *Sound like anybody else we know?*

Lifting my shoulders limply, I stare down at the drink in my ha  
blow out a breath. If someone had told me three years ago that I’d b  
watching my father die, after being dumped by my longtime girlfrie  
ave of struggling to keep up with school and work, I wouldn’t have believe  
o about Then again, nobody expects their life to do a complete one-eighty. I  
who’ve everyone says to hope for the best, expect the worst, but plan to be surp  
l of the The number of surprises I’m dealing with lately is just a little too  
r of the for any one person to handle, which only adds to the anger slowly bu  
under my skin. I was raised to be tougher than this. So why am I str  
; wrong so much harder compared to the man who’s dying?

be you Not wanting to think about it anymore, I decide to shift gears and  
otes so the conversation. “What’s new with you?” I ask Matt. I lean back in th  
behind the store counter and listen to it creak. There’s only a small  
l take a cleaned off for when customers come to check out, and the rest is cov  
r’s logopaperwork I still need to fill out, organize, and file.

ions.” Matt looks around at the items lining the shelves by the register—  
ool, but candy, gum, and a few smaller household items people usually forget  
up until they see them. “There’s not much going on with me,” he  
es help grabbing a Snickers bar and tossing it onto the counter before pull  
ospitalsome money.

One of my brows pops up as I give him change for his chocolate  
membersaying, “I doubt that’s true since you’re still going hard for Rachel.  
: turned through the grapevine that she’s leaving as academic adviser now th  
that got in her last semester of grad school.”

, for the Matt waggles his eyebrows. “Yeah, but she’ll still be at Lindon tho  
his? My “As a *professor*, Clearwater. It was bad enough you were cor  
meetings flirting with her when she was on staff. She’s been working hard to  
hi with degree. Remember how excited she was when the school offered to

grad school if she'd work for them? Don't fuck this up for her because I'm hesitant. want to get your dick wet."

thing at He peels open the snack he bought. "You sound like Aiden started grumbles, speaking of the former tight end on our team. He takes a huge bite of the candy and, with his mouth half-full, adds, "We haven't done anything wrong. And Lindon can't afford to fire anybody else after the huge loss with the coaching staff."

I make a face, remembering the forced mass exodus that occurred around the football faculty earlier this year. The administration decided that the best way for them to go was for the best, which surprised a lot of people. "Look, do what you want. I would just hate to see anybody take any risks that don't pay off in the end." I sit back, grabbing my textbook again and opening to the chapter's why was on before.

It's a long moment later when Matt breaks the tense silence between us. "We're being careful."

I glance up at him, realizing Matt and Rachel must have already figured something out. They have no intention of ending anytime soon. The former football team used to work with her enough to know she's determined to make a future for herself. She could still end things with him if he's not willing to sit in the chair to that.

I've learned to expect the unexpected.

He drums his hands against the edge of the counter. "I don't suppose I could convince you to close up shop early and come to dinner with us. Mostly DJ, can I?"

My eyes go to the time on my phone screen before flicking back to the replies. I've still got a few hours before I'm supposed to close, but it *has* been a little out in here. A little too quiet for business, if I'm being honest.

"I have to be at the hospital by six" is how I reply, grabbing the keys before where I keep them hidden under the counter. "And I'm taking my coffee."

Matt looks both pleased and surprised, probably the same way she'd know I've justified taking a break for once. "The crew will be here to see you."

They have no idea how much the feeling is reciprocated.

instantly  
get her  
pay for



use youDAD IS SLEEPING when I finally make it to the hospital, and it gives me *really* look at him. When he's awake, he tries downplaying everything, "hehe's not on the verge of death."

ige bite "Hey," a quiet voice greets from behind.

nything I turn to see Emma there with a small smile on her face. "Hi. scandalexpect to see you here. Did you pick up another shift?"

I've learned her schedule by now, especially knowing she's one of the few people who can get Dad to eat, even if it's pastries that one of the coworkers brings in. At this point, Mom and I don't care what he eats as long as it's something.

pan out She peeks around my shoulder at Dad before nodding toward the hallway. I follow her out, watching as she stops a few feet from the door and lets out a

tired sigh. "We've had a lot of callouts today, so I was voluntold to stay here. My boss can try getting another person to cover. It's not looking optimistic."

My brows dart up. "How long have you been here?"

started She lifts her wrist and looks at the purple smartwatch. When she looks at the time, I know the answer isn't going to be a good one. "Over twenty-four hours. I dozed in the on-call room earlier, but I could use approximately a two-hour nap when I get home."

I whistle softly. "Damn, that's tough. Do you need anything?"

Coffee?" I look into Dad's room to see if he's still sleeping. When I turn to her, I ask, "Do you have time to get coffee down at the cafeteria? If not, I can bring you some and it's not the best, but..."

Before she can answer, one of the other women working calls out to her about a patient in a different room.

Emma frowns. "I want to, but I can't. I just wanted to check in with you. How are you doing?"

I slowly shake my head, sliding my hands into the pockets of my jeans and feeling like a total jackass. This girl is running on no sleep and still trying to be nice to me.

I look checking in on me despite how little of my time I've been able to give her. "I'm okay for right now. Fall semester has been a balancing act that's starting to think isn't worth it, but..." I let my words fade before lifting my shoulders. I haven't really admitted that to anyone, but peace eases from my chest once I say it aloud.

She reaches out and brushes her fingers along my arm in comfort, and I breathe a little easier. "I'm around if you ever want to talk. You have my number."

time tonumber. Even if this doesn't go anywhere serious, I don't see why w  
ng as ifbe friends.”

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted to use her number a lot mor  
have. Something always holds me back from following through. O  
Didn'tsomeone. “I know, and I appreciate it.”

“Anyway, I've got to go,” she says, starting to back away. Flashir  
e of thesmile, she gestures toward my dad's room. “Tell him I'll be back lat  
of hersomething better than the cafeteria meat loaf. Nobody should be subje  
as longthat.”

I snicker and wave her off, heading back into the hospital room th  
allway.become a little too familiar with. Dad is still snoozing, his soft  
ts out adrowned out by the machines he's attached to. I sit there for a while,  
ay untilat his paper-thin skin and sunken facial features, before pulling out my  
istic.” and thumbing through a few unanswered messages.

cringes, **DJ:** *Good to see you today man*

hours. I **Matt:** *The guys said we should make this a weekly thing*

en-year **Mom:** *How's he doing?*

Food? As much as I'd love to see my friends more often, I know I can't p  
rn backthem anything. If I let on how bad Dad is, I know they'd understand  
I knowcan't bring myself to be honest with them about the reality of the s  
because that means coming to terms with it myself.

t to her My father is dying.

ith you. More and more every day.

ny blue And there's no stopping it or slowing it down, which means th  
nd stillseparate women who have my mind in a constant state of confusion.  
ive her. thing we can do is watch as the cancer kills him.

hat I'm Swallowing, I thumb out two text messages one after the other,  
limply separate women who have my mind in a constant state of confusion.

ressure **Me:** *If you ever want to take me up on that coffee, you know where to find me*

**Me:** *I'm lost too*

Sitting back, I swipe a palm down my scruffy jaw that I haven't h  
, lettingto shave before feeling my phone buzz with a response from the  
ave my

re can't message I sent.

e than I Raine: *Should we talk about that night?*

r rather Staring at the text, I let out a frustrated sigh and put my phone back in my pocket. What did she expect when she told me she felt more lonely than when we were together? Had I suffocated her that much? Made her uncomfortable somehow?

ig me a er with ected to at I've snores staring 7 phone Maybe DJ isn't too far off about being addicted to her. Should she talk about the hookup? Probably. Do I want to tell her that we shouldn't have had sex? That I partially regret it? No. It'd hurt her feelings, and there's no point in that when there's enough damage between us already.

In a hoarse voice Dad asks, "Girl trouble?"

Despite myself, I can't help but laugh at the first words out of his mouth as he slowly wakes up and turns to look at me where I'm occupying the normal seat.

I admit, "You could say that."

He says those three damn words that I'm going to miss hearing from her: "Talk to me."

Fighting back the emotion rising up my throat, I do just that, know my promise on borrowed time to get sage advice from the man I've always looked up to. But I had aspired to be like.

Squeezing my eyes closed to fight back the sudden onslaught of emotion, I murmur, "I don't know what to do, Dad. Raine apologized for what happened. And no matter how much I wish I didn't, I still love her."

"So what's the problem?"

I take a deep breath. "I don't know if I can ever trust her not to break my heart again if I let her back in."

to two

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message I sent.

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## Chapter Eleven

# RAINE

THE MENU AT Bartise's is unique, and the seafood section makes my stomach growl. "What are you thinking about getting?" I ask Skylar, the sophomore dating DJ. I'm grateful she agreed to have dinner with me because I'm not sure if she'd stay loyal to her boyfriend's best friend or if she'd still be mine.

When Skylar started sharing some of the romance books she read over the summer, it was hard for me to have conversations about our favorite authors. We bonded over our love for smutty books and book boyfriends, but it was difficult getting into the romance mood when my love life was anything but the best.

"I think I want the chicken," she answers, eyes trained on the short-order poultry options and pointing to one. "The chicken parm sounds delicious. It's been a while since I've had any that isn't in tenderloin form."

My lips twitch into the ghost of a smile as I remember the first time she asked me out.

*"We should get chicken," Caleb says, pulling my focus away from the math homework I'm doing at the counter.*

*My eyebrows pop up as I remove the green apple lollipop that I had taken from the hardware store's display case from my mouth. "Did you want chicken?"*

*Caleb stops restocking the candy he's been working quietly on for the past twenty minutes. He swipes his palms down his thighs. "Or other than pizza. We could get pizza Friday night after the game. If you're still planning on coming, I mean. You don't have to, of course. Come to the game. Or, you know, pizza."*

*I sit back and stare at him for a second, pressing my lips together. My eyebrows threaten to curl upward. Stifling a giggle, I say, "Are you asking me to date, Caleb Anders?"*

*He blows out a long breath and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah.”*

*I watch him for a moment, forgetting all about the Pythagorean theorem in front of me that I’ve been struggling with since I started my shift this afternoon.*

*After a moment, I nod slowly and reply with a simple “I like chicken tenders.”*

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Snapping out of it when I hear Skylar ask what I’m thinking of ordering, I mumble a semicoherent “Mongolian shrimp,” even though my eyes lock on the chicken tender basket that takes me back in time.

Skylar doesn’t seem to notice the distance in my tone when she says, “That sounds yummy too.”

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Humming, I close the menu and push it off to the side. Grabbing my water, I study the blond, who’s still examining the food options.

I’m glad she and DJ have each other, especially after the horrible accident that happened to her freshman year.

“Hey, Sky?” I play with my water glass as she raises her eyes. “I’m not going out for tonight. I know I didn’t reach out much this summer...”

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e Caleb  
She shakes her head, a soft smile on her face that eases the tension in my chest. “You don’t need to be sorry, Raine. I get it. I’m glad you asked me to go out. Olive has been busy with Alex while he’s in town, and I wasn’t sure you’d want to hang out after everything.”

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ou say  
Her friend Olive is involved with a rookie on a national hockey team. He graduated with us in the spring. I didn’t realize she and Alex were still together. I assumed once he left Lindon, they’d call it quits.

I guess it’s just me who makes those types of choices.

“Can I ask...” Wetting my lips, I squirm on my seat and clear my throat. “Can I ask if he’s okay? You probably see Caleb more than I do. I’m not going out, but...” Would he want me to? He never so much as replied back to me when he texted me last. Just when I thought we’d finally get a chance to talk about what happened at the store, he ghosted me completely.

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ie on a  
Skylar’s smile doesn’t leave her face. “I think he’s trying to see if you’re okay, considering everything that’s going on. But I don’t know. I doubt a girl like you could actually be okay given what he’s going through with his dad.”

Nodding in agreement, I stare down at the table. I’m glad she’s honest. Most people would probably tell me he’s fine and leave it at that.

Sort of question why I want to know at all.

When the waitress comes back to our table to take our order, I pick up the menu and say, "I'll have the chicken tenders, please."

Skylar is staring at me.

But I don't meet her eyes.

That night after Mom goes to bed, I send another text to Caleb.

Me: *Can we talk?*

The text goes unanswered, and before I go to bed, I see that he posted a picture online of a table set with two plates and a girl's hand in the center of the image.

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things

MY FEET DRAG as I walk along Main Street after a horrible night's sleep, bad cramping and intrusive thoughts. I pointlessly waited for a text from Caleb only to be disappointed. It wasn't until after midnight when I finally went to bed, only to toss and turn, hoping anytime I flipped my head over there'd be a text waiting for me.

*Pathetic*, I chide myself. I've never lost sleep over whether a guy would call me before.

Especially not one who obviously has the right to move on with his life after I pushed him to do so.

I glance at my watch and wince when I realize I'm a few minutes late to meeting my dad. He's always been a stickler for punctuality, not that I blame him. Ever since he got his real estate license a few years ago, he's been on the go more times than not, which means embracing work and the agency he works through in the tricounty area. Dad always kept him on the go more times than not, which means embracing work and the agency he works through in the tricounty area. Dad always kept him on the go more times than not, which means embracing work and the agency he works through in the tricounty area.

"Sorry," I say as soon as I slide into our usual booth at the diner, our favorite place to meet up, and our orders never change. Burgers, fries, chocolate milkshakes with extra whipped cream. Dad always takes the booth from mine because I didn't like them as a kid. I haven't told him they've changed over the years because I like our routine.

"Are you all right?" he asks, one of his dark eyebrows arching

peel my cardigan off and put it over my purse beside me.

For a second, I wonder if he knows just how much pain I'm in tempted to cancel on him today to take some Motrin and lie down heating pad on my stomach, but I knew Dad would be hurt if I didn't "Yeah, why?"

"You're five minutes late," he says. "Just thought something might have popped up. You look a little..."

I groan internally, already knowing how rough I look. The mechanic took barely kicked in before I told Mom I was leaving. "No woman would hear that she looks anything other than lovely, Dad. I'm having an accident that's all. We're allowed to have them once in a while."

Thankfully, he doesn't press or lecture me on timeliness and character on this topic. "Okay, princess. I meant no harm."

I simply nod once, moving pieces of my frizzy burgundy hair behind my ear.

"Some good news," my dad says. "I might have a buyer for the Lakeview home over in Decatur."

I smile, knowing that property was causing him a lot of stress over the past few months. "That's the million-dollar home that was renovated last year, right?"

Pride takes over his expression, brightening the greenish-blue eyes I'd gotten from him instead of my brown ones from Mom. "It is. The house has a few people interested but only one of them who wasn't offering under the asking price or for ridiculous stipulations in the contract."

"I'm glad," I tell him, hoping that'll ease some of his worries. He blames enough going on trying to balance meetings with Mom and the lawyer built a doesn't need other things weighing him down. "Do you think the deal is through then? I know your boss wasn't sure the price tag was going to work in the current market."

He rolls his eyes, grabbing one of the full water glasses and putting it toward him. "That's because she didn't see the vision like I did. It's all about how you sell it." There's a pause before he scratches at his clean-shaven face. "Speaking of selling, I wanted to run something by you."

I lean back with caution. "Okay..."

"The summer cabin is in a great vacation area, and your mother has been debating putting it up for sale."

Sitting up straighter with surprise, I shake my head. “You know I was never going to happen, right? Even though it’s in Mom’s name, I would put up too much of a fight. There are a lot of memories in that cabin. Maybe that’s selfish of me to say, considering I’ve had my fair share of memories there too, but I couldn’t imagine my one place to escape to just going away.”

He folds his hands together on the table and leans forward. “I know your mom and I have spoken about how the money we could get from the sale would help you with college. You’re in debt because of the loans you took out over the last few years, neither she nor I want to see you drown in them. I can get the cabin off the market and get a great price for it. It doesn’t make sense to have it sit on the market and get ruined by the people your aunt rents it out to during the off-season. And you’re going to be busy with graduate school and your certification, so it isn’t like you’ll be able to visit as much. Keeping it up, maintaining it, will be more money than it’s worth.”

Rubbing my hands down my thighs, I shake my head. “Mom and Dad love that cabin. I love that place. They swore it’d stay in the family forever. Grandma Maud died because she loved it too. I appreciate you guys wanting to help me, but you don’t need to. I can manage my loans. I’m responsible.”

“I know you are,” he replies. “This isn’t a question of whether you can or can’t. It’s a question of whether you want to be responsible.”

My shoulders drop. “Then what is this about? Why do you want to help me now? Does this have to do with the divorce?”

He glances out the window for a moment before sighing once. “It’s about the divorce. I’m not after the money. In fact, I won’t get a single cent from this sale. The whole point of this is to help *you*. I spoke to your mother last night, and—”

I stare at him. “You talked to Mom?”

She was on the phone for a while last night, but she told me it was Tiffany on the other end of the phone. I didn’t think much about it because she and her sister always gossip whenever they can.

He finally says, “Believe it or not, I still want to make her happy. What would make her happy is showing you how much she loves you doing this. She’s proud of you, Raine. You’ve been so smart with your choices you make in your life, so she wants to make sure you’re taking care of yourself.”

Smart. My mother always calls me that, but she never mentions it academically. I do just fine, getting mostly As for years in school. But no. She keeps rubbing my breakup in my face by trying to make me think it was the best decision I've made. "I can take care of you, you know. I've been doing it for a while. I'd rather not be the reason for the rift between Mom and her sister. They're close, but this could make things complicated. And she needs somebody in her life right now, especially if she could—"

Stopping myself before I can say *the divorce*, I close my eyes and try to focus on the group. I have no idea whose feelings I'm trying to save by brushing the topic at this point—mine or Dad's. Seeing him brings back a lot of memories of when the three of us were a family. Even if those picture-perfect moments were rare, they existed. And it gave me hope for my own future because I knew what *not* to do in my relationship.

Yet here I am anyway, learning how to move forward from the Tiffany who could have given me that.

I'd hardly call that smart at all.

"Mom doesn't have a lot of people in her life is all I mean. I'd like to see her get into a fight with the one person who's always been there. You seemed really happy at the cabin this summer."

He simply answers, "I get it. I do. I don't want that for her either. The best thing is for you to think about this. For your mother. It's not a done deal. We're simply discussing it as a possibility."

I sit back in the booth and absorb all this. "You really do love her, right?"

His fingers graze his jaw. "It takes a long time to unlove someone, kid."

Swallowing my words, I glance down at the table and the little scarves Aunt people have made into the wood with their initials.

When the waitress comes over a few minutes later, she's not surprised by what we order. And as soon as the milkshakes are delivered, Dad looks at me and plucks off the cherry from mine with a smile and asks, "So everything going with you?"

For a moment, I debate what to tell him. The truth or a lie?

When I say "Things have been fine," it's obvious he hasn't heard anything from all the times Mom has said that same four-letter word.

means it was far from the truth.

1. I *am* All the oblivious man in front of me responds with is “That’s  
saying to princess.”

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All the oblivious man in front of me responds with is “That’s good, princess.”



## Chapter Twelve

# RAINE

SLIDING INTO MY usual seat for my first class the next day, I groan at the induced nausea twisting my stomach. I raided Mom's medicine cabinet this morning to take anything I thought could help before school, but it didn't help.

"You look like you're either hungover or ate the mystery meat the cafeteria served yesterday," Charity, one of my longtime classmates, comments, studying the way I wrap my fingers around the ginger ale. "Shouldn't you be worried? Because you're a little paler than usual, and I swore to myself I was *not* going to get sick this year."

Charity has always been worried about catching colds when the school year starts. During freshman year, she got so sick she had to miss two weeks of school.

I hold my hands up. "I woke up feeling a little queasy." I want to tell her about the food from the diner, but I know it isn't that. "It's not contagious, so don't get your Lysol out. I know you carry it."

She eyes me suspiciously. "How do you—"

"Junior year adolescent psychology. Remember what you did to Josie? She was terrified of you after that. She literally dropped the class because she didn't have to see you again."

Charity blows a raspberry with her lips in exasperation. "I didn't realize you were getting anything in her eyes. She'd been sneezing without covering her mouth, and I wanted to clean the air around me. It was innocent."

The noise escaping me is abrupt and unattractive, but I don't care. I know I don't care about the scathing look Charity gives me for being a germaphobe.

"You probably shouldn't Lysol anyone in the first place, Char," I tell her, knowing she'll more than likely do it again. I refuse to be victim number two.

When I bend down to grab my things from my bag, I suck in a breath to ignore the sharp pain tugging at my lower abdomen and try breathing through it without giving anything away.

If Charity notices, she doesn't say anything about it for the rest of the fifty-minute lecture. It gives me a chance to suffer in silence, praying the day to pass in a blur so I can curl up in the fetal position hugging my laptop pad and a waste basket.

Before we're dismissed, Professor Wild starts going around the room with a glass bowl full of paper. "I want each of you to select one prompt from the bowl. This will be the subject of your final project at the end of the semester. You'll be asked not only to conduct interviews with at least two different people as if they're your client but to write a detailed paper on how that subject is vital to the study of psychotherapy. While you *are* allowed to talk up with your peers, I will offer extra credit to those who use outside sources to complete this project so long as they sign off by the deadline prior to your syllabus."

When the middle-aged woman gets to me, I reach into the bowl and pull out one of the few pieces of paper left. Unfolding it, I gape at what's written along the middle and wonder what kind of cruel joke the universe is playing on me.

*The psychology of romantic relationships.*

Blinking slowly, I look up at the professor, who's moved on to the next section of students. "You're going to take on an angle of your topic that you see fit. Preferably one that you're most likely to see during a counseling session. Get creative. Use your imagination and, of course, some of the material laid out in your textbooks as resources to guide you. Remember, this is essentially practice for the future. What are you most likely to encounter? What advice would you give to them?"

Charity shows me hers.

*Psychology of domestic abuse.*

I cringe, a little more grateful for my topic. When I turn my paper over to show her, she laughs at the irony. She knows about the breakup. I don't want to go into details, since she and I have never really been friends, but most of the people around here know about the split. How could they not when the paper was handed out at the university's graduation ceremony? There are photos and videos of the moment I rejected Caleb and walked away that circulate

reath at first few weeks of summer.

ough it Leaning back against the chair, I fold the paper back up and stuff my notebook.

of the Professor Wild returns to the front of the room and starts writing I for the dates for the project on the board for us to copy down. “You will be v heating on these projects throughout the semester, so I highly suggest you brainstorming where you’d like to take your topics and whom you’d e room partner with, because I expect a polished draft by finals week.”

pt from Charity leans toward me. “I don’t suppose you’d want to be each ie term partners? I can play the scorned lover who has major commitment issu ifferent you can be the docile doe-eyed girlfriend who’s on the run from her w your boyfriend. I’m thinking his name will be Greg because that sounds to pair douchebag name, right? We could easily ace this.”

sources I think about it for a second and remember what my grade was on i nted on assignment a few weeks back. It wasn’t great, which means I could extra credit.

nd pull Closing my notebook and stuffing it into my bag, I say, “As much written love to trash-talk your ex”—I eye her knowingly. She must have for playing met her egotistical ex-boyfriend Greg a time or two—“I think I’m g try finding someone outside class to get some extra points.”

She frowns but nods. “Okay. Who do you think you’ll ask?”

he next My options are limited. “I’m not sure. Maybe my mom will help r as you it, but that subject might be sort of touchy considering the divorce an nselings shrug. “I’ll figure it out. She still owes me for forgetting my birth of the ditching our normal summer plans. I’m hoping I can sucker her into o er, this with a guilt trip.”

ounter? Charity grins. “Evil. I like it.”

I wink, even though I’m ninety percent positive that Mom is going me no. I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.

As we’re packing up, I notice a notification lighting up my phone around blossoms in my chest as I pick it up and type in my passcode, thinking Not the Caleb’s name, only to be met with a spam text from an unknown num

people Standing up after turning off my phone screen and sliding my cell i roposal pocket, I sway on my feet and have to grab the back of my chair for ba tos and “Whoa.” Charity grabs a hold of my arm as I blink back the dizziness ited the accompanies the next wave of nausea that my ginger ale obviously

touched. “Do you need to go to the health clinic?”

Waving her off, I take a few deep breaths until I feel better. “No, I’m fine. Just...” I take a few more deep breaths, counting to five. “It’s nothing. Thank you though.”

As I straighten up and collect myself, I try ignoring all the heaving and building inside me. It’ll be a few days before I feel better if it’s anything like last time, but I know stress won’t help. The more I think about Caleb, the worse it’ll be to recover.

I never thought I’d feel sick over a boy again, but here I am. And I get to psychoanalyze myself and all the reasons why I’m an idiot for being abusive this way when I have no right to.

Sometimes I worry that I’ll make a horrible counselor because of all the problems figuring out the reasons I do what I do. Like breaking up with Caleb and then being depressed about it. Or feeling sick when I think about where I’ll be six months from now compared to him. Will I be happy with someone else while I’m still single thinking about him? Or will I be as I’d both be on the same path alone, trying to find ourselves? I don’t even know what I’ll feel like tomorrow, much less in that much time.

*I’m lost too*, he texted me.

That doesn’t make me happy to know. I wish I was the only one who felt that way. Then at least I’d know I did the right thing for his sake, if only for mine.

As long as he’s not like *this*. Rooted deep with every kind of irrational thought possible.

I grip my backpack strap tighter, knowing I’ll never break free from this train of thought if I keep focusing on it.

“I’ll see you Friday,” I tell Charity, evading her concerned expression by weaving through the other students exiting the classroom.

I skip my other classes because I don’t think I’ll feel well enough to go to them *and* work later.

I’ll see

you

later

into my

class

room.

It’s

twenty

minutes

from

closing

when I finally get a chance to sit down. Elena walks into the back and stops when she sees me clutching a book. She hasn’t



peppermint tea that Bea made for me when she commented on how  
'm fine. looked. The teenager gives me a once-over before tossing the rag in h  
Stress. into the little hamper in the corner.

“Are you still upset over that mishap earlier? It wasn’t a big dea  
avinessshrugs. “The guy wasn’t even mad about it. His wife was a little piss  
ing likeshe always has sort of a resting bitch face whenever she—”

leb, the “Enough,” Bea cuts her off in a scolding tone, coming into the roc  
an empty tray that used to have croissants on it. She made them with  
d now Ichocolate filling and chocolate drizzle on top to look like spiderweb  
r actingOctober is quickly approaching. “We don’t gossip about customer

Even if it is true. That woman is a snake no matter how nice you are  
I haveSpilling a little coffee on her bag isn’t the end of the world.”

king up I can’t say I feel bad about it now. Not after she lectured me c  
never Iexpensive the black leather bag was when I accidentally tipped her hus  
ll he becoffee onto it. He, on the other hand, told me it was no big deal. I refi  
Will wecoffee as I was berated by the woman at his side.

n know Bea turns toward me with her hands on her hips. “That woman is  
harping on someone when it comes to her husband. I never understoc  
he saw in her. A pretty face, I suppose, when you look past the scowl.”

who felt I can’t help but crack a smile despite how much energy it takes. B  
not forthe rising headache in my temples, the stomachache making me quea  
the constant ache in my lower back, I’ve had a rough day. Elena has  
intrusivemy ear off to the point that I haven’t had one second of peace since I .

And because I didn’t want to admit just how off I felt, her nonstop p  
om thatplay on her day worsened the growing throbbing in my skull.

The teen huffs. “I thought we weren’t allowed to gossip ab  
sion bycustomers.”

Sipping my tea to hide my trembling lips, I hear Bea reply with a  
to go toown this place, child. I can do as I please.”

Her granddaughter grumbles under her breath before heading ou  
main room to start to clean up.

I shift in my chair, trying to swallow down the threatening naus  
never been a huge fan of tea, and every sip makes me want to gag. Bu  
eased my stomach, so I power through until the cup is empty. “I  
: down. anything you need help with back here before I go help her?”  
cup of

Bea stares at me, her eyes narrowing a bit as she scans my fac

green I down the entirety of my body. She's been eyeing me throughout the entire hand without saying a word, and I haven't asked what's on her mind. "Maybe I will go out there or Elena will drag her feet to get extra hours. She thinks it's the first car will be brand new, so she wants to earn all the money she can save, but have it in me to tell her that her mom will never let her get one."

"A car?"

"A new one," she corrects. Shaking her head, she glances toward the orange in question. "I know for a fact that she scratched her mother's car since practicing three-point turns. Then dented her father's trying to parallel park here. I cringe. A new car definitely wouldn't be ideal for her then. I'll make sure everything is cleaned up."

I set the cup in the sink and head back out to see Elena aggro on how scrubbing the counter like she's got a vendetta against it. I approach and grab one of the coffee pots with barely half a cup left in it and dumped it into the sink. "You good over there?"

For once, the teen is uncharacteristically quiet. It makes me look over my shoulder at her to see if she's okay. Her movement pauses before she resumes and keeps scrubbing. "Grandma doesn't think I'm responsible enough to handle a new car. I thought if I worked hard, I could prove to her that between parents that I deserve one."

I start washing out the pot. "I don't think you have to worry about proving you deserve one, Lena. They just want to make sure whatever you arrive at is...sturdy." I can feel her rolling her eyes at my careful choice of words. "Plus, car insurance isn't cheap for new drivers. They're going to make sure you're covered and safe."

"You sound like them," she mumbles.

I move from one machine to the next. "It isn't a bad thing that that happened about you. My parents were the same way when I started driving. Then after I got my license, I hit a deer and messed up the bumper so badly that it almost cost a grand to fix."

"A grand? Like, one thousand dollars?" she all but gasps.

It still makes me flinch to think about. "It was bad. I thought I was going to have to be grounded for months, but my parents were just glad I was okay and that there was insurance on the car."

While I have my issues with my parents, they've never made me feel unloved. The few times I've messed up, like the deer incident, they

he day make a huge deal out of it. They didn't yell or fight or anything I was  
light as from them. They rushed to the scene of the accident and hugged me  
nks her than I'd ever been hugged by either of them because they were wor  
i. Don't gotten hurt and were grateful I wasn't.

Elena is quiet again. Then, "You haven't said much about them.  
people are talking about their...uh..."

the girl "You can say divorce. It isn't like it's a secret. Trust me when I s  
r while sometimes people are better off without each other. They're healthier."  
park." "Is that why you broke up with Caleb?"

"I'll go I freeze at the question, hands stilling on the pot handle my fing  
tightly wrapped around. There's no easy way to explain why I did wh  
essively without giving too much away.

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nping it "Sorry," she says. "People say I'm too nosey for my own good. Yo  
were really cute is all. I was thinking you'd get married and make a  
ver my little—"

ie sighs "Elena," Bea chides, cutting off her granddaughter. It's nothing I  
ough to heard before, but it doesn't hurt any less to hear. "Read the room  
and my Enough talking. More cleaning."

My stomach hurts replaying all the times I thought I'd have that  
7 about too. That was when I was a teenager, expecting to be like everybody e  
ver you was young and in love.

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before tuning out everybody around me to finish my shift trapped  
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make a huge deal out of it. They didn't yell or fight or anything I was used to from them. They rushed to the scene of the accident and hugged me tighter than I'd ever been hugged by either of them because they were worried I'd gotten hurt and were grateful I wasn't.

Elena is quiet again. Then, "You haven't said much about them. I know people are talking about their...uh..."

"You can say divorce. It isn't like it's a secret. Trust me when I say that sometimes people are better off without each other. They're healthier."

"Is that why you broke up with Caleb?"

I freeze at the question, hands stilling on the pot handle my fingers are tightly wrapped around. There's no easy way to explain why I did what I did without giving too much away.

It's beyond fear. It's reality.

"Sorry," she says. "People say I'm too nosey for my own good. You guys were really cute is all. I was thinking you'd get married and make adorable little—"

"Elena," Bea chides, cutting off her granddaughter. It's nothing I haven't heard before, but it doesn't hurt any less to hear. "Read the room, child. Enough talking. More cleaning."

My stomach hurts replaying all the times I thought I'd have that future too. That was when I was a teenager, expecting to be like everybody else who was young and in love.

Before the future became *real*. Plausible.

"I don't think that future is very likely anymore" is what I tell Elena before tuning out everybody around me to finish my shift trapped in the depths of my own mind.



## Chapter Thirteen

# CALEB

SPENDING THE BETTER part of the last three and a half years living with a bunch of horned-up, cocky football players meant hearing and seeing a lot of things. Whenever one of them would go through a breakup, there'd always be somebody telling them to get under somebody new to get over what they're stuck on.

I gave advice to anybody who asked for it that I'd like to think was reasonable, not solely based on sex. Ironically, now that I've moved out and live on my own without anybody pestering me with sage wisdom, I'm using myself using the physical stuff to get through all the other tangled thoughts inside my head.

Slowly peeling the comforter off my body, I creep out of bed and look over my shoulder at the raven-haired beauty sleeping soundly on my stomach. The comforter has fallen halfway off her naked body, showing the small tattoo of an open birdcage on her shoulder and the script tattoo running down the length of her spine that's from her favorite Edgar Allan Poe poem.

The first time we slept together, we lay in bed while I grazed my fingertips along the letters and listened to her tell me about the other things she wants to get. She loves literature, flowers, and music, so she wants those favorite things represented. When she asked if I ever wanted any, I told her I couldn't think of anything permanent that I'd want immortalized on my body.

It's not entirely the truth.

A long time ago, I thought about going with Aiden Griffith to get a tattoo of work done when he was getting his Captain America shield filled in. I was a popular artist in the next town over. I had every intention of getting my name until the guy who owned the parlor talked me out of it. "You know what the future will bring, my man. I've seen a lot of people regret ever getting names tatted on them."

I wanted to get it ten times more just to prove I wouldn't be one of

people. The only reason I didn't go through with it is because it was only studio and I had none on me at the time. When he asked if I would make an appointment to come back, I told him I'd call.

Guess that was fate's way of stepping in.

Gathering my things, I start dressing on the other side of the room, peeking at the girl hugging a pillow on the bed. I never stay the night, which is why I never invite her to my place. I know I'd feel bad kicking her out. All was said and done. The thought of sharing my space with someone sends me in a panic spiral, especially because Emma and I aren't exclusive. And as much as I have a feeling she wants to be, the only thing I can give her is taking it a date at a time.

I'm slipping on my boots by the door when Emma comes to, glancing at me and asking, "Are you leaving already?"

Glancing at the time on her microwave, I wince at how late it is. "I've been asleep for a while. It's almost two. I've got a test in the morning, but I don't want to do any more of that bullshit."

She never says if she wants me to stay and never bothers asking. I know she knows she'd be setting herself up for disappointment.

Walking over, I bend down and press a quick kiss to her head. "Close your eyes and go to sleep. I know you're off tomorrow. You could use all the rest you can get."

Emma watches me for a second before sitting up, lifting the comforter to cover her bare chest. She looks like she's about to say something but settles with "Good luck on your test."

I smile, pecking her lips before grabbing my keys from my sweater pocket. "Thanks. I'll let you know when I get home."

All she does is nod, and I feel those eyes follow me as I make my way out the front door of her apartment.

Do I feel bad for ditching her every time we hook up? Yes. She's the first person I've slept with besides Raine. And despite the breakup, it still feels like I'm cheating on Raine by sleeping next to somebody else. The ridiculous thought digs its claws in as I drive home, walk into my apartment, and sit in the silence I'm surrounded by.

One of these days, I'll sleep over at Emma's. If she'll let me. But I know by then she'll be sick of my back-and-forth, and I wouldn't blame her.

I'm sick of it too.

And while I don't want things with us to end, I wouldn't hold it against her if she told me she was done.

a cash- This time, I'd let her walk away.  
nted to



om and THE STORM ECHOES throughout the valley, causing me to shift for th  
ght. It's time in bed, praying for sleep to come. I've been lying here for a co  
it when hours, and just when I'm about to drift off, a new boom of thunder rat  
ne new windows and startles me back to consciousness.

clusive. I used to stay up just so I could watch the storms from the enclose  
promise on my parents' house. Dad would always be outside on the swing h  
rocking with Mom in, and we'd sit there in silence as we witnessed  
roggily Nature's wrath. It was somehow peaceful to see how the lightning  
brighten the otherwise pitch-black sky and how the air had a  
You've welcoming scent to it as the rain trickled down onto the tin roof.

so..." Dad even talked Raine into sitting out there with us whenever s  
Maybe over for dinner or to have family game nights with us. He'd always  
joke about how the sky was calling for her whenever it would open u  
to back sky is trying to get your attention, Raine," he'd always say, nudg  
in get." playfully. "Are you going to answer?"

orter to Once, he convinced us to go out and dance in the rain. Rai  
else but laughing at my horrible dance moves, telling me I should leave  
sideline entertainment to DJ, since he tended to show off his moves  
eatshirt halftime. I remember the day it was pouring down and Raine got my  
not only go out with her but dance with her too.

escape It made me think of what our wedding would be like. She'd dan  
her father, I'd dance with my mother, and maybe Dad would ask h  
he only chance to dance with him before I stole her away for the night.

ill feels We'd never have that now.

icious The nostalgic feeling of those late nights on the porch is long  
d listen replaced by dread over how different everything is now. It weighs do  
stomach until I'm giving up on sleep, tossing the thin blanket off  
maybe walking over to my small apartment window to see what mayhem is  
outside. The front lawn has a huge puddle in the middle of it, and one  
trash cans is tipped over from the howling wind.

against It's late in the year for storms like this, but it's better than the sr

got in October a few years ago. People were trick-or-treating with coats on over their costumes, collecting candy in between snow squalls.

When I walk into the tiny kitchen, I hear the *drip, drip, drip* definitely not coming from the sink faucet. Flicking on the light, I do examination of my surroundings before turning toward the open living room. The space is crowded by the big couch that was given to me by a friend's family and a cheap TV stand I bought online with an eight-year-old television on it.

And right above that old piece of technology is a huge water stain with droplets slowly coming through the bubbled ceiling.

"Fuck," I curse, rushing over to unplug my TV and pull the stand away from the leak. I clench my eyes closed before taking a few deep breaths to calm myself down. Mom always told me that getting worked up goes nowhere fast, and it's obvious that there's nothing to be done about the already damaged.

So instead of the sleep I desperately need before my first exam begins early tomorrow morning, I spend the next two hours fixing the leak. It includes going to the family hardware store, getting materials to patch the roof, and waiting out the storm in order to actually cover the damage before it does more damage inside.

By the time five a.m. rolls around, I'm so tired I can't keep my eyes open. I hop into the shower to warm up from the cold air, spend the next few minutes trying to dry up the wet carpet, then pass out on the couch.

It feels like seconds later when my phone alarm goes off, telling me to get my ass up for class. And for the first time, I don't. I don't know if it's exhaustion weighing down my limbs or the fogginess making logic impossible, but I don't care about my test. Or about school or about my job later at the store.

All I want is sleep.

An extra five minutes.

Maybe ten.

Turning my alarm off, I doze back off, not thinking about anything, much less the constant noise of my phone going off. Subconsciously, I know I'll regret choosing to ignore my responsibilities when I wake up. But for the first time in a long time, I manage to get a completely undisturbed sleep.

winter No dreams.

s. No nightmares.

o that's Nothing. And maybe complete silence is what I need, even if I can't get it in small doses.

g room. When I wake up a little while later, there are eight missed messages on my phone. Since none of them are from my frantic mother, I choose not to read them. It probably makes me a little bit of an asshole, especially because I saw Emma's name in the mix, but I can't gather enough energy today to care about anything or anyone.

By the time I slide into my usual seat minutes before my last class ends, I'm getting a few stares from people who I typically beat here.

maths to DJ, who's taking a few of the same classes as me this semester, then he hands me a crumpled-up piece of paper from the row over. He leans forward and says, "Everything good?"

I lift my shoulder and nod as if to say *same old, same old*. There are always updates anytime one of my friends asks how I'm doing these days. Which default answer is "fine" or "okay" with an occasional "tired" mixed in. It feels like being halfway honest, but most times I lie through my teeth. In fact, I've always been the friend who's had his shit together.

DJ exchanges a look with somebody on the other side of him, then turns back to me, slowly nodding. "Okay, well...good."

twenty He's being weird. Then again, that's not entirely abnormal for DJ. I miss anything this morning? I emailed Kroger about the exam and he gets back to me. Sort of hoping he lets me make it up."

it's the My friend sits back. "He isn't a total douche, so I don't see why he wouldn't. You've had a lot going on."

ry shift I make a face, not wanting to let my father's condition be the reason I blow off school. Realistically, today shouldn't have happened. I realize that when I woke up feeling like shit about skipping class when I could have just chugged a cup of coffee or three and made it in. I even studied for this exam, unlike others I've gone in and half-assed, hoping for a decent grade.

much of Cracking my sore neck because of the shitty position I slept in last night, I blow out a breath and grab my notebook. "I don't know. I know you were able to do it last time, but I didn't know you knew about everything and acted like he couldn't give less of a shit about it. I almost asked him for an extension once, but the man would never have given it to me. I almost asked him for an extension once, but the man would never have given it to me. I almost asked him for an extension once, but the man would never have given it to me. It's like he knew the second I walked up to him

One of our other classmates, Jeremy, snorts at the drop of the well-known professor's name. "That's because Neilson has a rep to protect. Most of the people here are only carved from Satan himself. He gave me a C on a project during undergrad. Me."

I'm glad I'm not the only one who rolls my eyes at Jeremy's remark. He does too when we share a look. The kid has been full of himself since he was specially known him, which has been three years. A lot of people who stuck around for their MBA also did undergrad at Lindon and shared a lot of classes together.

There are some people, like Jeremy and his big head, I wouldn't mess with. I never saw again.

I'd take Professor Neilson over him any day because at least the professor is a man who takes no shit and also rarely speaks it.

"I'm just saying," Jeremy keeps going, leaning back and crossing his arms. "If I could get a grade like that, it's obvious the man doesn't care never damn about anybody. With Kroger, you're basically going to be handed your ass. The because he'll probably feel bad for you."

Eye twitching, I focus solely on the notebook I'm opening to last semester because scribbles.

DJ asks Jeremy, "When you talk, do you ever hear what a douchebag you sound like? Or is it sort of an 'in one ear and out the other' situation?"

I don't hold back the snort as I grab my pen from my pocket and jot down a note. "Did I today's date in the corner. I'm tempted to tell DJ to stop while he's still here because it isn't worth dealing with Jeremy, but hearing the idiot try to get away out of this conversation is the most entertainment I'll get all day.

That is until Jeremy says "What? I'm being honest. People aren't going to treat a student whose dad is dying like anybody else. He's going to get a free pass. Not even professors want that kind of bad karma on them."

The room grows quiet.

Deathly quiet.

No murmurs.

No conversations from anybody.

Slowly, I look up at the guy who knows he fucked up. When I look at Neilson with him, it looks like he's trying not to shit himself.

The worst part is that people do pity me.

They've pitied me since they heard the news. The number of times I've been told "sorry" has made me fucking immune to the word. I don't

-known want to hear it anymore in any context, which is probably why he  
an was from Raine didn't mean shit the way it would have before Dad's diagn  
lergrad. Their condolences don't change anything, least of all the fact that  
is dying. But does that mean I want to hear people say it aloud and  
ark. DJI'm asking for a handout? Like I expect one?

e we've No.

und for Fuck no.

gether. "Jeremy," I say in a low, slow tone, "I'm usually not one to start s  
ind if I am the one who tends to end it. So for once in your life, I suggest y  
the hell up before I make you shut up. I'm in no goddamn mood to  
elderly your bullshit. Understand?"

The tension in the room grows, so much so that the professor w  
ing his hand stops to study everybody because he can sense something is a  
give a happen. When he sees the stare-off between me and the douche who  
ed an A have just pissed himself, he clears his throat and makes his way up  
front.

class's "Sorry I'm late," he says, still eyeing us in the back. When his focu  
to me specifically, I can't help but feel my jaw clench. "I wasn't ex  
ag you you, Caleb. I figured you'd be dealing with..." His words trail off,  
snapping me away from Jeremy.

ot down The confusion on my face must be obvious because DJ cuts in wi  
s ahead store."

talk his Dumbly, I repeat, "The store?"

More people stare.

going to My friend's eyes grow wary. "Dude, didn't you look at your pl  
et some figured that's why you weren't in class this morning. People at Bea  
" talking about it. Matt and I tried getting ahold of you too, but you  
answer, so we figured you were already there with the cops. Raine s  
reached out to you after she called the police."

I pull out my phone and notice just how many messages there actu  
that I've been avoiding since I woke up earlier.

ck eyes "Fuck," I say, darting up and collecting my things and ignoring th  
clattering to the floor behind me.

I read one message.

ies I've Then another.

't even Another.

aring it Raine did, in fact, message me three different times before calling. osis. Ronny. DJ. Matt. There are a few other people who are friends of the my dadwho reached out, including a retired cop who Dad always played pok act likeon Friday nights before he was too sick to go.

DJ stands too. "I'll come with you."

I don't have time to argue as I walk out of the classroom, feeling biggest dickhead known to man. The one time I take a fucking break, shit, buthardware store is robbed because I obviously didn't lock the fuckin ou shutbehind me when I left this morning.

day for DJ says, "Take a deep breath, man. You look like you're al explode."

alks in I stop abruptly, turning to him faster than he's expecting. "That's l bout toI am. *One* day, DJ. I wanted one goddamn day where I didn't have o mightwith anything. I'm running on little sleep and coffee fumes. And loc o to thehappens when I try being selfish. I ignore a shit ton of people who've trying to get in contact with me for *hours* so that they don't have to re is turnsto my parents and add more shit onto their plates. The store pectingresponsibility now."

finally I swipe a hand through my hair, feeling how shaky my palm is fr anger. From the *guilt*.

th "The Slowly, DJ takes the keys dangling from my free hand. "I'm because you're going to rage the entire way there. The last thing you to damage your truck or, God forbid, get yourself or someone else because you're pissed."

hone? I I don't fight him on it because I know he's right. The last thing I 's weredo is get myself into a bigger hole than I'm already in.

it didn't "Caleb!" I hear, stopping me from opening the door to my truck. aid sheturn, I see Raine jogging over to DJ and me.

I hold up my hand, wanting to avoid any extra mixed emotions rig ally are"I can't handle any more bullshit today, Raine, so whatever you have needs to wait."

ie chair She stops abruptly a few feet away, lips parted in shock at my cool

DJ curses under his breath before shoving me toward the passenge "Get in the truck, dumbass, before you say more shit you're going to later."

Right before I climb in, I see Raine's crestfallen expression as she



. So did step back. I get in and slam the door shut with a groan, knowing th  
family uncalled for.

er with DJ walks over to her, but I don't know what they say. Her eyes g  
truck for a brief moment before she shakes her head, turns around, and  
away. My best friend walks over, climbs into the driver's side, and she  
like thea look.

and the "I don't want to hear it," I grumble, pinching the bridge of my nose  
ig door He scoffs. "I hope you realize what a dick move that was when yo  
your head. She was just checking in on you because she cares. Jesus."

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"I'll talk to her when I can."

because The only thing I give him is a noncommittal noise when he replies  
to deal can't do it all, Cal. You're not a superhero, and nobody expects you to  
ok what I harrumph, looking out the window as we drive down the main d  
ve been thinking about how much easier it'd be if I were one.

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step back. I get in and slam the door shut with a groan, knowing that was uncalled for.

DJ walks over to her, but I don't know what they say. Her eyes go to the truck for a brief moment before she shakes her head, turns around, and walks away. My best friend walks over, climbs into the driver's side, and shoots me a look.

"I don't want to hear it," I grumble, pinching the bridge of my nose.

He scoffs. "I hope you realize what a dick move that was when you clear your head. She was just checking in on you because she cares. Jesus."

That hits me square in the gut, which I have a feeling he was going for. "I'll talk to her when I can."

The only thing I give him is a noncommittal noise when he replies, "You can't do it all, Cal. You're not a superhero, and nobody expects you to be."

I harrumph, looking out the window as we drive down the main drag and thinking about how much easier it'd be if I were one.

## Chapter Fourteen

# RAINE

IT'S BEEN TWO days since I spoke to the police officer about the ha store, and I still haven't heard a single thing from Caleb after trying t him on campus. Did I expect a thank-you for letting him know? No figured I'd get some sort of update to make sure he was okay. I was wi give him the benefit of the doubt for snapping because he was ob having a bad day, but the silent treatment is hard not to be upset abou he's been using it to avoid talking about us having sex too.

Grumbling over my sour mood, I check my phone for the third tin hour and a fourth right after just in case he texted me and I didn't When I come to terms with the fact that he wants nothing to do wit decide to power off my cell and stuff it into my book bag. I can' another day obsessing over the situation. Namely, Caleb.

I spot Skylar walking into the library a few minutes later, h dancing along the sections of seating until they land on me. She way walks over to where I've got my textbooks all set up in front of me table with a perky smile on her face.

"Hey," she greets. Her eyes study the mess of school material in t me. "That all looks intense. I'm glad I ruled out psychology as a r that's the reading material."

I grab the apple-cinnamon flavored coffee I bought from Bea's a shift this morning and take a sip. "Yeah, classes are a little rou semester," I admit.

Mom had told me she didn't want to be part of my project in th Janet Copelin way possible. "I don't need to be part of your little session, Raine. I've got other things to focus on."

It wasn't necessarily a surprising reaction to hear since she rarely me with homework in the past, but I would have liked her to at least e helping me. "How are you doing?" I ask, gesturing toward the seat

from me. "You can sit if you'd like. I haven't seen DJ yet if that you're looking for."

Last time I crossed paths with DJ, he told me to give Caleb time going through it, Raine," he'd told me. "I'm not saying that what he s cool, but we both know that's not him. Just do me a favor when he c his senses? Make him grovel."

DJ was trying to make me feel better, but it didn't work. Because if anyone should be groveling for all the horrible stuff that's ha between us, it's not Caleb.

Skylar's sweet nature and DJ's typical goofy personality have m feel a little relieved that the people I've known for years aren't just g drop me out of their lives completely because of my relationship sh Caleb.

Mom told me not to worry about that stuff before the semester "Your true friends will never leave," she said. I guess she'd know. I v the small group of people who she and Dad hung out with on occasi between them, like their friends had to choose sides with the divor Mom spent weeks complaining to me about it, and there was nothing say to make it better.

Skylar sits down, dropping her things onto the small corner of th I'm not taking over. "I'm not sure he can come. He told me he w Caleb at the store. They're doing more cleanup today after the police c try getting fingerprints and look over the security footage. Did you s did it? Danny told me it looked bad when they went in the other day."

Knowing he saw the damage and still didn't reach out only makes worse, but I try not to let her see that. "I didn't go in or anything, but i look like there was anybody inside when I passed by. The police g pretty quickly, and they didn't mention anything either."

She nibbles her bottom lip. "That sucks." A brief pause surrou When she shifts and looks around, I'm wondering what's on her min she says, "Can I ask you something?"

I already know what it's about. "Sure."

"Do you miss him?"

The question sinks in almost instantly, but not as quickly as the : "Every day."

We share a look, and I note the confusion on her face. I understa

It's the same look most people give me over the situation. How could I not know someone I spent so much time with over the years? Losing Caleb felt like losing a piece of me.

My dad was "Did you date anyone before DJ?"

It comes to Skylar looks at me, her brow unfurrowing as if she understands. "I'm going with this. "Not anything serious, but yes. I had one relationship I know before him."

It happened I nod. "I haven't. It's always been..." Well, it hasn't always been that way, but if I brought up Cody, people probably would think I broke up with him solely because I wanted to explore other options.

Am I going to Did I try using that as an excuse when Caleb pressured me for a night after I told him no? Yes, I did. It was a cop-out that I'm not proud of, but I thought it was better than the truth.

It started. Maybe if he was angry at me for worrying I was settling down with the wrong person, he'd be able to move on with someone who can give me the legacy he's always wanted to build. The children and house with a white picket fence.

I could It hurts way too much to think about, but that's my burden to bear, not Skylar's, Caleb's, or anybody else's problem.

At the table "I have a lot to figure out, Sky. Things I wish I could have done better as with asked me to marry him and things I'm probably still avoiding a little. Some feelings have to be dealt with on your own without any other interference who and I knew I wouldn't be able to sort them out if we were together. I was scared to tell him yes, and the next thing I knew I was being escorted home from the football field by my family."

It didn't I'm still mortified by the experience. I'd rather not think about it there more times than not it's the last thing that replays in my head but I can't manage to sleep at night. His face is melded into my mind, the expressions he gave me a combination of pure shock and heartbreak.

And then The blond across from me reaches over and squeezes my hand once more. "I'm sure it couldn't have been an easy choice. Do you think you'll ever...?"

That's the million-dollar question that everybody wants to know the answer to. Do I have feelings for him? Yes. But has anything really changed since I let him go? No. Because he doesn't know how deep my problems go and how they'll impact him if I were finally honest with him.

ot missabout them. Where would that leave us even if we jumped back in he  
felt likeNot anywhere healthy.

“It’s not really up to me,” I admit, rubbing my arm before pickin  
highlighter.

s where We fall back to silence again save the people talking at the tables  
ionshipus.

Skylar clears her throat after a few minutes and pulls out her  
Caleb, “Olive and I are planning on going to this open mic night at Hulbert.  
h Calebsure if that’s your thing, but you’re welcome to come.”

I nibble my bottom lip. “When is it?”

reason “Thursday night.” She smiles. “I don’t know if you’ve got any othe  
f, but Isince it’s Halloween. We were planning on meeting at Bea’s, actually,  
food beforehand. We could all meet up and then head over if you  
with theworking a shift that night.”

him the I won’t know my schedule until tomorrow, which I tell her. “I’ll  
a whiteknow,” I promise. It might be good to go out. I’ve had people invite  
things before, but usually Caleb and I would do something else.  
ar. Notthought he’d enjoy open mic nights. Most of his friends would te  
people brave enough to perform or crack jokes there, and even thou  
efore henot like them, I never wanted him to be bored. So I didn’t bother g  
le. Butstuff like that.

fluence, Her eyes go down to her phone before that friendly smile gro  
: I wassomething much bigger. “Danny is on his way now. He’s trying to c  
d awayme that we need a tortoise. Long story. I’ll fill you in another time. A  
let me know about open mic night when you know your schedule.”

it, but I give her a nod before waving her off when DJ walks in a few r  
efore llater. He puts his arm around Skylar’s shoulders, tugging her into a  
sion hehug and pressing a kiss against the top of her head. Those two have be  
since day one. There’s still a tiny piece of jealousy that makes itself  
e. “I’mwhen it has no right. When I force myself to look away, I notice t  
vo willperson who walked into the library after them.

And he’s looking right at me.

v. Do I I expect him to walk away or head toward the table Skylar and I  
turningsat down at. Instead, Caleb beelines right for me. I have to swallow th  
go—thechoking noise when he stops right where Skylar was sitting only r  
with himbefore. He doesn’t sit down, simply stands and watches me watch him

adfirst? Then he says, "Thank you."

Two words.

ing up a I fidget, feeling eyes on us.

I wanted to hear from him, but I'm surprised it's face-to-face. aroundwould have been better. A lot less personal.

His lips press together as he dips his chin and picks at his shirt. phone.things are better said in person," he says as if he can read my mind. "I'm not one of them. I appreciate you calling the cops and getting them there more could be taken at the store. I know that's probably what you can't say before I acted like an ass toward you the other day. You didn't or plans that."

to grab "Is everything okay?" For some reason, I feel the need to elaborate not "With the store, I mean. Did they get any money or do a lot of damage

He shifts on his feet uncomfortably. "It will be. They couldn't get let you register, but they took some expensive stuff to make up for it." He e me to finally lift to mine before a small sigh escapes those downturned lips. I never my fault," he mumbles.

ase the My brows pinch. "How?"

gh he's "I forgot to lock the door. I was tired and not thinking straight."

oing to I frown. "You can't blame yourself for other people's actions. The to rob the place whether the door was locked or not. Do the police have ws into leads?"

onvince "The cameras picked up a little bit. It's fuzzy, but it's something t nyway, with."

All I can manage is "Good."

minutes His throat clears. "Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you. So..."

frontal "Yeah."

en cute "Okay."

known He still stands there.

he new I still stare at him.

"I know you don't want to," I say quietly, feeling a little awkward bringing it up, "but I still think we should talk about what happened b JJ have us. Just for some clarity."

e weird He doesn't look particularly thrilled at the idea of discussing our h minutes even two months after it happened. Not that I can say I am. "Look, i back. one-time thing. Right? I just assumed we were both in the moment l

we're not together anymore. I was emotional. I don't know what else about it."

It takes me a few seconds to figure out how to respond, feeling the A text of his uncertainty absorb into my chest. I don't know what I expected say, but it wasn't that.

"Some "Right." Why does my heart ache so much right now? "Yeah. I "This is mean anything. I guess I just wanted to clear the air. Make sure y before okay."

ne over Okay is the last thing Caleb is, and we both know it. The two deserve haven't changed and neither has our situation.

Caleb begins to say something else, his lips parting, before he app borate. second-guesses himself and turns to leave.

?" "Wait," I call out before he can walk away again. He glances into the hesitantly. This time, it's me who struggles to find the right words. Sh is eyes drooping, I shake my head and tell myself to stop being a coward.

"It was need anything, let me know. I know we're not together, but I can hel up the store if you haven't finished yet. I'm still here."

*I'm still here for you* is what I don't say, hoping he'll read betw lines.

y chose His lips press together before he nods once and says, "Okay."

ave any Okay. That word again. Something tells me he won't be reaching help.

o work From the corner of my eye, I see both Skylar and DJ givi sympathetic looks when Caleb walks away. I bet that's how they lo him the day of graduation when I was the one doing the escaping.



FOR THE LONGEST time, there were only three places in Lindon considered my safe places—Bea's Bakery, the football house where ard for and some of his teammates used to live, and the campus library. I nev between people that my parents' constant arguing was a reason I preferred stay of the house for as long as I could growing up or why I settled for the s look up, house even though the girls were catty and never had anything nice t was a about one another half the time. The football house was a peaceful g because



to say and I enjoyed spending time there, even when the boys would get a little competitive playing video games or tease me and Caleb if we went upstairs. Living back at home is different now. It's quieter without Dad and Mom, but it's also more isolating because Mom stays busy with her tailoring gigs that leave her on opposite sides of the house when we're both here. I thought I'd like it, but I didn't. I was wrong.

When I walk into the kitchen, I see a note on the whiteboard on the wall that says Mom went to meet with Dad and their lawyers.

Grabbing a water, my keys, and my bag, I head out the door and give a small smile to the elderly man next door. Mr. Applebee barely talks to anybody, but he's always outside working on his beautiful garden.

Sometimes I wonder what his life story is, but Mom and Dad always tell me to mind my own business instead of asking a million questions like I used to do.

"Hi, Mr. Applebee," I greet in passing, noting the bright red tomatoes he's picking from what must be the last crop of the season. "It looks like you've got a better crop this year. I heard people saying they were having issues with their tomatoes last year because of the bugs."

When I was a teenager, my parents thought it'd be fun to have our own garden. We spent weeks building a section in the backyard for it, with the help of Caleb and his father at the hardware store supplying helpful tips and tricks, and supplies, only for all the plants to die looking sad and dying. Mom said she didn't want to waste more time and money trying to grow anything else, so the cute garden bed we spent so much time on is just a patch of dirt now.

My neighbor simply nods once and goes back to the tomatoes. I head off and head down the sidewalk, hoping a walk in the fresh air will help clear my head and get me in the mindset to get some work done. I have a lot of reading to do by tomorrow that I've barely touched because my mind has been elsewhere.

I'm walking toward the entrance of the local park that has my favorite walking trail when I see a dog sniffing one of the garbage cans on the path. There's no collar on the tiny gray puppy that can't be more than a couple months old.

"Hey, cutie," I greet, cautiously approaching the friendly dog. I like it like it could be some sort of pit bull mix. Whatever it is, it's adorable.

little too crouch down and reach out carefully to let it sniff my fingers before stairs. pink tongue darts out and licks me. “You’re far too little to be wandering a little here alone, especially by the busy street.”

pull me up I glance around to see if anyone is searching for him and frown when I realize it’s only me out here. Sitting down on the concrete, I watch the animal slowly approaches me with a little waddle that makes me smile. The smile grows when he steps onto my leg and wags his tail so hard his butt wiggles. “Do you believe in fate? I’ve always wanted a dog of my own and maybe now is the perfect time.”

talks to A cute, high-pitched bark comes from my new four-legged garden, currently standing in my lap. It makes me laugh as I scratch between its ears and see him wag his tail harder.

tend to I’ve always said I wanted to get a dog when I got my own place, but I never lived anywhere that had room for one. Caleb and I discussed what breeds would be good or what place we should adopt from, but we never got to that point.

having “It’d be like our baby,” I tell Caleb, looking up at him from where my head rests on his lap. “Corgis are pretty cute. Have you seen the one on our own gone viral online? His accounts are all named Conner the Corgi. I spend too much time watching the videos his owners make of him.”

curl tips, Caleb smiles down at me, passing me another handful of Milk Duds, sending my hair out of my eyes. “Corgis are cute, but you know what’s cuter? A bulldog? Frenchies are now all adorable too.”

He laughs. “I was thinking about an actual baby.”

shrug it My lips twitch downward at the thought.

help me The appetite I had is squandered by the baby talk. Not because I want a pile of babies but because I remember vividly what my doctor told me about my health years ago. After it happened. I don’t like thinking about that.

Denial at its best.

favorite Staring at the candy melting in my hand, I say, “We’re only two people in a corner. We’ve got a long time before we consider a baby. We’re still just a couple of ourselves.”

He bends and kisses my temple. “You’re right. But I think we’re going to look like some cute kids one day.”

able. I Throat tightening, I make a humming noise in feigned agreement.

One day.”

Maybe I should have just ripped the Band-Aid off and told him  
was the first time Caleb ever brought up babies, but it definitely was  
when I last time. I’d always find a reasonable response.

*We’re still young.*

*We’ve got our careers to focus on.*

*We should get a dog first.*

*We need a house.*

*What about our student debt?*

I knew those excuses would run out eventually. And they did.

I glance under the puppy to see if he is, in fact, a boy. Sometimes  
can’t sleep at night, I’ll google puppies for sale in my area to see w  
e, but I options are. The price tags are the only real reason I haven’t tried ha  
d what actually get one. That and my mom always being hesitant about pets  
er made we lost our tiger cat, Murphy, years ago, she swore we’d never get  
pet because it was too hard to see them go. Dad thought she was being  
ere my dramatic, but I understood. Losing things you love puts a hole in you  
e that’s that never really heals no matter the amount of time that passes.

“Oh my God, you found him!” someone says frantically from beh  
I look over my shoulder to see a girl who looks around my age.

Dark hair, almost black. Tall. Pretty.

She stops beside me and squats down, fussing over the dog who’s  
pretty happy to see her. “He got out of the yard earlier when I wasn’t loc  
swear, I knew this one was going to be trouble as soon as he was born  
you so much for keeping an eye on him.”

My chest deflates, along with the possibility of me being able to t  
I hate little guy home with me. “What’s his name?”

The girl smiles at me, her eyes a unique shade of gray-blue that I  
seen often. “He doesn’t have one, actually. My parents’ pit bull  
unexpected litter of puppies with the neighbor’s dog, so my family t  
ity-one not to name them or else I’d get attached. I already am though. How c  
babies not be when you see that face?”

I turn back to the puppy in question. “So he’s for sale?”

“Are you interested? My mom isn’t sure what to price them at qu  
but I can talk to her. You’re Raine, right?”

“Yeah. My eyes widen at her guess.

“I’ve seen pictures of you,” she admits. Before I can ask where she then. It photos of me, she stands and glances down at the puppy still on me. “I can’t ask my mom about this troublemaker. Pitties don’t sell well because of their reputation, so she may be willing to give you a really good price.”

I carefully pick up the squirming puppy and stand up, passing him to her. “I’d appreciate that. I can give you my number.”

She waves me off. “I’ll ask Caleb for it.” Lips parting in confusion, I remain quiet until she decides to elaborate. “I work at a hospital. I’m one of his dad’s nurses.”

Wow. Small world. “That’s a tough job, especially if you work with dying patients like him.” The dying ones, that is. She has to be strong to deal with that my with being surrounded by people you can’t save.

She shrugs, her friendly expression not falling or morphing into anything else. “It can be, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything. What’s that?” “Another.” “Everyone comes into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. I’d like to think the patients who come into my life are there to make a difference in our hearts somehow.”

I find myself nodding along, a tight smile on my face despite the feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I didn’t catch your name,” I tell her.

She holds out her hand. “Emma.”

We’re quiet for a moment before the puppy in her arms starts barking clearly squirming, demanding to be let down. “You’d better get going before I stop talking. I’m on you. That’d be about my luck.”

Her nose scrunches. “Trust me, it’s already happened at least three times since the puppies were born. Pee everywhere. Then again, you never make this what fluids you’ll get on you in the hospital.” She shrugs again.

“I’ll make it my practice for whenever I become a mom someday. Everyone has to get a dog before you have a kid, so you know what you’re in for.”

Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m just looking for a dog right now.”

Emma laughs lightly. “You just went green. I’m teasing. I should be able to answer about the puppies in the next week or two.”

I watch her and my potential four-legged roommate walk away waving them off.

Walking toward the trail, I find myself smiling at the step I’m taking to move forward after a little too long of sulking in the choices I made in the past. The hole in my chest is still there, but it doesn’t

's seen intimidating.

'Let me      When I get home, I see a basket full of ripe tomatoes on the doors  
of their a little note about the best ways to eat them. My smile widens in the d  
of Mr. Applebee's house, knowing he's the one who brought them.

over to      For the first time in a long while, I feel hope.

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intimidating.

When I get home, I see a basket full of ripe tomatoes on the doorstep and a little note about the best ways to eat them. My smile widens in the direction of Mr. Applebee's house, knowing he's the one who brought them.

For the first time in a long while, I feel hope.

## Chapter Fifteen

# RAINE

MR. APPLEBEE IS tending to one of his garden boxes when I round the fence splitting our properties after another long day at work. I'm tired, my back hurts, and stress has given me another headache that makes my head ache.

"Thank you for the tomatoes," I tell my neighbor, stopping at the gate door of his property. "I cut one up for BLT sandwiches."

My fingers smooth along the top of the fence. He built it all on his own. I remember when he and his wife, a cute little woman who couldn't have been taller than four foot nine, spent two weeks painting it white a long time ago.

The elderly man looks up, pausing what he's doing with the seeds. He doesn't say anything at first but eventually glances down at his hands holding his gardening gloves with a short nod. "You're welcome."

His voice is gravelly. Nobody really hears it anymore since he got older. He passed years ago. For the most part, he keeps to himself. He gardens, goes to the grocery store, and he walks to the cemetery a block away to visit the grave of the woman he loved. I'm not sure he has any family around here. If he does, they don't see him. Does he get any social interaction?

Mom told me not to bother him, but maybe he needs that once in a while. "What do you do in the winter when it's too cold to grow anything?"

Once again, he stops what he's doing to look up at me. Huffing a little, he sighs, he peels off his gloves and slowly pushes himself to standing. "Why do you want to know?"

I lift a shoulder innocently. "I like hearing people's stories. Did you know I'm in school for psychology?"

He drops the gloves into the wheelbarrow beside him. "I'm not a therapist, young lady."

My lips curl in amusement. "That's good because I'm not a therapist. Not yet anyway. I'm working on it."

He stares at me.

My eyes go to my childhood home, which I'm sure is empty as all I don't want to be alone right now. That means constantly thinking, and to shut my brain off for a little while.

I lean against the fence. "Can I ask you something?"

He closes his eyes for a second and walks around the garden box where I'm standing. "Well, nothing's stopped you from asking questions far."

"Do you have any kids?" I ask, not remembering any growing up. I haven't always lived next door, but this was his home for a long time. I know it's none of my business, but I've only ever seen you here. It's a kind of lonely. I get lonely sometimes."

Mr. Applebee glances off in the distance, gripping the top of the post. "When you get to be my age, loneliness is the least of your problems."

A heaviness weighs down my lips. "What if you didn't have a wife?"

His bushy white brows arch up.

"I've got a project for school I could use some help with," I tell him. "I don't want to be bugging you with questions about relationships. I'd love to hear yours with your wife. You two were always smiling no matter what you were doing."

A small smile appears on his face. "That was my Annemarie. She was the happiest soul put on this earth. Didn't matter what we were going to do, she always had a positive outlook on life. She had a lot of goals she didn't know how to accomplish. No doubt she would have changed the world if she had more time."

It makes my stomach fuzzy to hear the love in his voice while he talks about her. "What do you say, then? Would you be interested in helping me with the assignment? We can meet up somewhere. Maybe Bea's Bakery. Have you been there, and we've got really good pastries and coffee. It'd be a peaceful way to work on the assignment."

My neighbor scrubs his jaw. "I don't know. I don't get out much..."

I perk up. "Which means this is the perfect opportunity for you to take on this assignment. It's worth a lot of my grade, and I still need two people to help me with it. This will be perfect for both of us. And I'd really love to hear about Annemarie."



He takes one more deep breath and dips his chin. “Fine. But I can’t watch *Wheel of Fortune*. Haven’t missed an episode yet and won’t until the day I want to die.”

I’ll give him one thing: he’s loyal.

I stand straighter and stick my hand out toward him. “That sounds like a fair deal, Mr. Applebee.”

He stares at my hand for a second before shaking on it. “If we’re doing this, you should probably call me Leon.”

They  
ime. “I  
ust get



A WHITE BAG that smells like grease and fries is placed in front of me, and my eyes go up to my mother. “I know I said we’d try cooking something for dinner tonight, but it turns out you need actual groceries to do that,” she says.

My lips twitch as I open the fast-food bag and peek inside. “Please tell me the chicken nuggets are for me?”

Mom rolls her eyes as she goes over to the sink and starts washing her hands. “Well, I don’t eat them. That was always you and your father’s thing. You two used to fight over which sauce was the best.”

I grin, remembering all the petty arguments we’d get into. Mom threatened to take away all our sauces if we didn’t behave, and I cried because I thought she was joking. But one time she actually did, and then Dad got into a fight about how he never acts his age and that he never grew up. The moment was spoiled after that.

“I always thought the barbecue was better until I tried them with ranch dressing,” I say, brushing off the thought.

Mom dries her hands and helps me distribute the food. “I don’t understand why you’re so obsessed with chicken. Especially nugget tenders. It’s like you’re reverting back to your childhood.”

There are worse things I can be addicted to, so I’d say my love for chicken isn’t all that horrible. “Have you heard from Dad lately?” I know you saw him the other day.”

Mom has Aunt Tiffany to talk to, but I want her to know I’m here to talk to her. She sighs and steals a fry from one of the containers. “I spoke to her on the phone the other day. Be grateful you got out of a relationship, and more

It's not miss You're far too young to settle down anyway. You've got your whole day ahead of you. Plenty of time to make dumb decisions that won't cost a lifetime."

My eye twitches at the passive-aggressive answer, and I wonder how she hears how hurtful it is. I'd hardly say her settling with Dad ruined my life unless she considers motherhood to be that strenuous. Some people do only wish for that kind of life. "Caleb and I are..." What are we? We're friends, but we're not enemies. "I still have so much respect for him. Let's not disrupt that."

She unwraps her burger. "All I'm saying is that you did the right thing choosing yourself. It's far less drama, and you can focus on all the things you want to do with your life."

And she couldn't? "What would you have done if you didn't get pregnant with me?"

Her eyes lift to mine. "I don't think about that because it didn't happen. Best not to focus on what could have been."

There's no doubt in my mind that my mother loves me. Maybe she would have preferred having me a little later in life or having a child with someone else, but she doesn't resent or regret having me. Still, hearing her disapprove of my future simply because I exist doesn't sit well with me. It's not what I would want if I were in her shoes.

"You could still do something now," I tell her, picking at my nails. "I'm in college, Dad is doing his own thing. You've got all the time in the world to do whatever it is you wanted to do before having me. So what is your plan?"

For a moment, she looks contemplative. I'm not sure she's going to answer when she sits down beside me and picks up her food. "I've always wanted to travel, especially overseas. Get inspiration from fashion in Italy or Milan. I thought about opening my own boutique or thrift shop too, using my own designs and gathering vintage items. Something that showcased unique pieces you can't find in any other store around here."

There's a small smile on her face as she thinks about it, which makes me smile too. "I didn't know that. I could picture you in France."

She stares at her food, an absent look on her face. "Like I said, I don't like to focus on things like that. Sometimes we need to let go of our expectations because that's the only way to accept what our actual reality is. Raine."

I know it isn't my fault that she feels like she can't travel or buy things

ole lifeboutique, but there's still a sadness that weighs me down hearing her s  
t you aHer choices may have been what led her here, but there is always mc  
one piece to a puzzle to get the full image. I'm a factor in that.

r if she Is that why I hurt Caleb and myself? Because I couldn't fully acc  
her lifereality? Or was it because I accepted it too quickly?

e could I suppose the endgame is all the same.

e're not Mom sets down her partially eaten burger and points a fry at me. “  
, Mom,you still think about him,” she says. “It's all over your face. Take it fr  
sweetie. Letting go of what's in your past is what helps you build a  
t thingThere's nobody to weigh you down that way.”

ags you Nostrils twitching, I manage a feeble nod even though I don't  
believe her. I want to tell her about Cody. About the night I woke up in  
regnantof my own blood. What would she do if she knew I drove myself to I  
Parenthood because I was too afraid to ask her to take me? Would sl  
appen.scolded me for being irresponsible or comforted me? I wish I knew w  
answer was, but I never know which way my mother might lean  
e wouldmoment.

nobody I know she's not totally wrong, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to  
niss herall the pent-up feelings—the sadness, the anger, the pity, the *love*—th  
l wouldfeel for Caleb Anders.

That night, when I'm lying in bed and listening to the steady rain  
uggets.against the tin roof, I get a text that only feeds the rebellious feeling th  
e in theagainst my mother.

it?”

oing to **Caleb:** *I can't sleep*

always I stare at the three words and wonder if more are coming. Had he  
Paris or to send that to me or to somebody else? A girl? Maybe one of his frien

ing my Eventually, I thumb out a reply.

all the

**Me:** *Me either*

ikes me

**Caleb:** *The sky is calling you...*

I don't Swallowing at the words his father used to tell me, I watch as tho  
of our bubbles dance along the bottom of the screen as he keeps typing.

ity is.” In my heart, I know what the next sentence will be.

er own

ay that.      **Caleb:** *Are you going to answer it?*  
re than

I sit up and look at the time on my phone. It's late, and I'd be dum  
ept my anywhere tonight, especially to see Caleb.

But I know when I throw the blankets off, examine my outfit, and  
over at my closest pair of shoes that I've made up my mind.

'I know      So I send another message to the boy who knows me better than a  
om me, else in hopes he'll pull through.  
future.

**Me:** *Meet me at our spot*

want to      If he doesn't come, maybe it's a sign that Mom is right. I'll need to  
a pool But if he's there...

planned      I don't know what that means.

ne have      But it means something.

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**Caleb:** *Are you going to answer it?*

I sit up and look at the time on my phone. It's late, and I'd be dumb to go anywhere tonight, especially to see Caleb.

But I know when I throw the blankets off, examine my outfit, and glance over at my closest pair of shoes that I've made up my mind.

So I send another message to the boy who knows me better than anybody else in hopes he'll pull through.

**Me:** *Meet me at our spot*

If he doesn't come, maybe it's a sign that Mom is right. I'll need to let go. But if he's there...

I don't know what that means.

But it means something.

## Chapter Sixteen

# CALEB

OUR SPOT HAPPENS to be the edge of Alden Field on the outskirts of where they set up flea markets and fireworks displays in the summer. It's Octoberfest in the fall, and sled races in the winter after the first big snow. It's a well-known area, especially to local teens who like to sneak smoke weed, set up bonfires near the woods, drink, and hook up.

Raine and I used to come here when we wanted privacy to look up at the stars or watch the storms that would whip through the area. And sure, we had our fair share of make-out sessions in the cab of my truck. Once the move was made, it was hard *not* to make more.

Our first kiss was in this field, weeks after our first date at Birdseye where we each got the chicken tenders basket from the kids' menu with an extra order of fries. Long gone was the version of me who could barely put together a sentence asking her out coherently, because Raine made everything so...easy.

That's always been part of her personality. There was comfort in the conversation I had with her back then. When did that stop? I've been trying with my brain trying to come up with an answer, and I draw a blank every time. There were moments in the beginning of our relationship that were perfect because of how new it was, but by the time we went to college, I thought things were stable.

Caleb and Raine against the world.

Maybe it was the other way around.

I scope the area out as the rain comes down, splattering large droplets against the windshield of my truck. Was Raine up watching the storm? Was she thinking about me, or trying not to the same way I've attempted to stop thinking about her? Turns out that's a hell of a lot easier said than done.

I probably should have left, knowing she was coming here, but this is one of my favorite places. It's calming despite all the memories I've shared

Raine here. It's where I come to think and be by myself whenever I spare moment when my apartment seems too daunting.

Still, temptation sinks its claws in like it always does when involved. And despite all the reasons why I should fight it, I let her back

A drug.

A weakness.

That's when I see her running across the muddied field in the rain. My heart does the same damn thing it always has. It beats a little bit faster than the moment before because it doesn't know any better.

"Christ," I murmur. She has no umbrella, rain jacket, or boots.

I get out of the truck and jog over to the passenger side with the jacket on my back. I get my jacket up, protecting me from the downpour, and open the door for her as she gets closer. "Are you crazy? Why didn't you drive?"

Raine doesn't get in right away. Hair wet and sticking to the sides of her face, she looks at me and lifts one of her shoulders. "I needed the front seat. Plus, the car has been acting up, so it probably would have woken Mom."

Heaven forbid Janet knows her grown daughter is leaving to see a doctor. "Yeah, what a shit show that would be," I grumble.

I don't miss the frown weighing down my ex-girlfriend's face before she climbs into the truck. After closing the door behind her, I walk around the front again and get in the other side. Once my door is closed, we're back in silence with only the muffled sound of the rain pelting the metal sheets around us.

"Do you remember the first time we ever came out here?" she asks quietly as she stares out the windshield.

Does she know she's shaking? I reach into the back to grab one of the spare shirts I always keep in here and pass it to her. "Dry off. It's cold tonight."

I lean forward and turn the heat on, hoping it actually works. You know what you're going to get with this twenty-plus-year-old Ford.

When I lean back, I watch her use my shirt to wipe off her face and then squeeze her hair dry. "We were invited to a party out here," I recall, looking toward the spot where people still tend to congregate. "It was the first time you ever drank. You puked in your neighbor's bushes and was trying to sneak you back inside your house."

She cringes. "Poor Mr. Applebee had to hose it off the next

have awatched him from the living room window, too embarrassed to tell  
was me. That wasn't my proudest moment. I'm not sure why I kept d  
1 she's that night anyway. The beer was terrible."

ck in. My lips twitch upward despite me trying to fight the amusement.  
room temperature and the cheapest kind they could find. But you stop  
it the more you drink."

in, and Raine fiddles with the borrowed shirt she's holding. "We kiss  
it fasternight. Before the whole puking-in-the-hedges thing."

I lose my small smile. "I remember."

*"Dance with me?" I ask Raine, pulling her off to the side. The  
ood of other people coupling up and dancing, some leaving to find a priva  
r her as and a few others pouring more drinks.*

*We slow dance for a few minutes with her arms around my neck  
s of her hands on her hips. Neither one of us can look away from the other.*

esh air. *I move first, only a little hesitant when I brush my lips against her  
n up." taste like beer and the reminiscence of the watermelon Chapstick I s  
see me. put on earlier. It's a small kiss, minuscule really, but it doesn't feel th*

*It feels so much bigger.*

ore she *Bigger than two fifteen-year-olds.*

und the *I would have kissed her longer, but then some of the guys I play  
athed in with whistle and catcall at us, making Raine's cheeks pinken.*

elting *I know in that moment I want a lifetime of kisses from this girl.*

Raine lowers the shirt onto her lap. "I was so nervous that night."

s, voice My brows pinch. "Why?"

"Because I was worried that you were going to kiss me and I'd be  
e of them since I'd never..." There's humor melded into those words that  
old outsmiling at the memory. "I guess I drank so much for liquid courage  
you were going to make a move."

u never I snort. Maybe that was a sign all along. Anybody who needs to ge  
to kiss somebody else probably isn't going to last with them long-term

d arms, Resting my head back against the seat, I close my eyes and heav  
finally deep breath. "This is probably a bad idea. Us here tonight."

"It was I'm met with momentary silence. "If you think that, then why  
when I here?"

Pressing my lips together, I turn my head to look at the girl I can  
day. I thinking about no matter how hard I try. My first kiss. My first ever



him it What she doesn't know is that I was nervous as hell to kiss her that night. I'd wanted to since the night we were put in a closet together all those years before.

"It was She fidgets the longer I study her. Her hair isn't sticking to her skin anymore but pulled behind her ears. It always looks darker when it's almost brunette, similar to the color of her eyes.

ed that She's effortlessly beautiful no matter what, even without makeup. She's looking like my parents' dog Frank when he gets stuck out in the rain.

It hurts to be this close to her and still not have her at all.

ere are "Caleb?" she asks.

te spot, My nostrils flare with a sudden burst of emotion that I try to swallow.

Because I don't want to think about how beautiful she is. I want to remember how much she hurt me. How I'm with Emma now. How much easier it would be if I could let everything we've been through go.

s. They "My dad is dying," I say, voice cracking with weakness. "And it feels like I can't keep my head above water long enough to breathe. Every time I think about him leaving us, I—I—"

I swipe at my face and try collecting my shattered thoughts before I start crying. I feel the tears pricking my eyes and heat creep up the back of my neck the longer I hold it in.

Crying shows your weakness. That's what's been drilled into my head by society. By all my football coaches who've ever told me not to let anyone know they've defeated me. I can be angry, but I can't give in.

Forcing another deep breath, I say, "I try not to think about it by being busy with school and the store, but there's always a reminder that I have here everything I do is *because* of him." Closing my eyes and squeezing them shut, I whisper, "And I just need the thoughts to turn off for a while. I shouldn't be here. But..."

it drunk *But I don't have anywhere else I can go.*

. That's the excuse I make.

re out a *I could be at my apartment.*

*I could be with Emma.*

are you I'm not though.

I'm with the one person whose touch physically calms me. One day she doesn't stop brushing of her hand against mine, and I melt into nearly a decade of memories. I've always been comfortable enough to tell her anything because she's

ght too. one person I could talk to about whatever weighed me down.

months Now is no different.

Her fingers tug at mine until our hands are molded together so cheeks nothing can get in between them.

t's wet, "I meant what I said at the library," she tells me. "I'm here for y whatever you need."

up and Those words sink into my chest, jump-starting the tight organ in cage that feels like it's going to explode the second her fingers dance arm and massage the tense muscles along the way.

*Whatever you need.*

lowing. What if I told her all I need is her?

member I could risk it, but I don't know how much more disappointment it'd betake in this lifetime.

Suddenly, there's nothing innocent about the touches that we share feels like in first, but Raine meets me halfway. That's when touching turns into I think which turns into moaning. One second she's in the seat beside me, t she's straddling my lap.

e I start Her damp shirt is off.

of my No bra.

My jeans are unbuttoned with the zipper pulled down.

read by Her leggings disappear.

people No panties.

She hates wearing anything under her leggings because of pant keeping and it drove me fucking crazy. It was rare, but there were times we because sneak off for a quickie whenever she wore them because I knew all I g them do was peel down the body-hugging material.

le. So I My fingers grip the back of her head as the kiss goes on, her twisting with mine and her body moving along the hard length freed from boxers. I can feel how wet she is, how her breath shudders every time glides along my shaft.

There's a brief nudge in my consciousness that tells me I should stop from moving forward. For me. For Raine. For Emma. But do I?

No.

e single I bite down on her bottom lip when she grabs a hold of me at memories. inching down my shaft. She's tight as hell, squeezing my cock and making it was the impossible not to groan as she works her way to the hilt. A pinch

tweaks her face, followed by a sharp intake of breath as she sits there for a few seconds, then starts to move.

tightly “Wait,” I tell her, squeezing her hips once. “Do I need to get a condom or...?”

ou. For We rarely ever used them because she was on the pill, which was never lost in the familiarity at the hardware store. But I know it’s better to be safe than sorry, so I’m ribconsidering our situation now.

up my A flicker of sadness sweeps over her expression as her lips curve downward. “We don’t need one.”

It’s the answer I expect, but it doesn’t match the dullness in her eyes where lust usually is whenever we’re like this. “Raine—”

at I can “No more talking,” she tells me, cutting off the conversation before I can seep in.

e. I lean My body listens, shutting off my brain despite the warning alarm bells. I start kissing her head.

he next It’s a haze of desperation from there. The truck rocks, the glass floor vibrates, everything else around us fades away until all I hear are the little noises of her escape as she moves on top of me.

I let her take the lead, resting my hands on her hips and groaning as she grinds and swivels until I’m jerking inside her.

“Going to come,” I warn her, fingertips tightening into her flesh as she rides it out, gripping the seat behind my head and letting hers tilt back. She lets out the sexiest moan that has me letting go.

ould I can feel her clenching around me, milking me of every last drop of pleasure I had to spill inside her as she breaks apart when I work her clit.

It takes a few minutes to catch our breaths, her eyes dropping to the floor as she sees one solitary tear roll down my cheek.

om my That tear holds a lot.

me she Says a lot.

Feels like a lot.

top this *Weakness, weakness, weakness.*

Swiping it away, I grab the shirt she used to dry off with and wipe her face clean once she climbs off me, then toss it onto the floor and wash my hands. “Here,” I tell her, passing the hoodie she took off me. “You should put your wet clothes back on or you’ll get sick.”

of pain She stares at the offering like she can’t believe we’re here again.

re for eventually takes it. “Thank you” is her whispered reply.

I want to say something, anything, but don’t know what there is to  
condomall. I clear my throat and fight back the other tears that build in the b  
my eyes.

why we “You can cry around me,” Raine tells me softly. “You’re going th  
r to asklot right now.”

All I can manage is a hoarse “I know.”

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her. I’ve given enough of myself to her tonight. I need to hold on to  
er eyesleft.

“We shouldn’t have done that” is my reply, clenching my eyes clo  
re logicpinching the bridge of my nose.

She’s silent, causing me to open my eyes and look at her. Her  
s in myparted, her eyes distant as they quickly move toward the window.

We go back to silence, waiting until the windshield defogs before  
gs, andher back to her parents’ place.

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protection,” I murmur, not that it matters now. “I still want kids, but...

g every She doesn’t need me to tell her why that’d be a bad idea for us now

Raine takes a deep breath before turning to me in the bc  
as shesweatshirt. She reaches over and cups my cheek, brushing her thumb a  
ward as “I know you do.”

My chest hurts as she drops her hand, opens the door, and sli  
op thatwithout another word. I watch in silence as she escapes into the  
shaking my head in disbelief.

mine to Before I pull away, I get a text from Emma, drawing me back i  
piss-poor reality I’ve created for myself.

**Emma:** *Miss you xx*

both of  
itch her  
ouldn’t

ain but

eventually takes it. “Thank you” is her whispered reply.

I want to say something, anything, but don’t know what there is to say at all. I clear my throat and fight back the other tears that build in the backs of my eyes.

“You can cry around me,” Raine tells me softly. “You’re going through a lot right now.”

All I can manage is a hoarse “I know.”

I don’t let myself be any more vulnerable than I already have been with her. I’ve given enough of myself to her tonight. I need to hold on to what’s left.

“We shouldn’t have done that” is my reply, clenching my eyes closed and pinching the bridge of my nose.

She’s silent, causing me to open my eyes and look at her. Her lips are parted, her eyes distant as they quickly move toward the window.

We go back to silence, waiting until the windshield defogs before I drive her back to her parents’ place.

I put the truck into park at the front curb. “We should have at least used protection,” I murmur, not that it matters now. “I still want kids, but…”

She doesn’t need me to tell her why that’d be a bad idea for us now.

Raine takes a deep breath before turning to me in the borrowed sweatshirt. She reaches over and cups my cheek, brushing her thumb along it. “I know you do.”

My chest hurts as she drops her hand, opens the door, and slides out without another word. I watch in silence as she escapes into the house, shaking my head in disbelief.

Before I pull away, I get a text from Emma, drawing me back into the piss-poor reality I’ve created for myself.

**Emma:** *Miss you xx*

## Chapter Seventeen

# RAINE

THE GIRLS' NIGHT at Hulbert with Skylar and Olive, Skylar's best friend, reminds me of what it's like to be a normal twenty-three-year-old girl—the kind with friends who can talk about anything from potential boyfriends to the current hockey season and everything in between. And the girls being careful not to broach the topic of boys, it still leaves me thinking about the brown-eyed one who's often in the forefront of my thoughts, especially after the night in his truck.

The first time I ever felt like I finally had some semblance of balance in my life was when Caleb and I were sixteen and sneaking around because our parents didn't want me dating. I had a friend *and* boyfriend wrapped up in one person. Somebody I could enjoy myself with even in the most awkward situations. Like when the hardware store was dead, and we'd find creative ways to pass the time that'd leave us laughing so loudly people would come in just to see what was so funny. Or little study dates doing geometry or biology that would end in little brushes of the hands, knees, or feet because we were both too shy to actually make a move.

Well, until the night at the field.

He was *my* person.

Nobody else's.

It wasn't until we were eighteen and both attending Lindon Union High School that we realized nobody could stop us from being together. My parents always had something to say about it because they were worried I'd get distracted, but I knew myself better than that. And I knew Caleb would never stop me from achieving all my dreams.

We both wanted the best for each other.

That was why it felt so empowering when those afternoon study date parties at the pizzeria suddenly were being held at the campus library, and the parties we'd sneak off to with almost-kisses in closets turned into

bashes at one of the frat houses. There, a lot more liquid courage led kisses on the dance floor. But nothing could even begin to compare first kiss at Alden Field. We didn't have to hold back or have moment in his truck. We could just be...us. Anywhere. Everywhere.

Because of that all-consuming feeling, I don't regret hooking up with him again. If anything, it felt right. I wanted him, maybe even needed him. I didn't want him to know.

friend, The moment we touched in his truck, we were us again, even if for a small fraction of time.

and again puppy Before college, it was hard to feel like everybody else because I stuck at home listening to my parents bicker nonstop about the tiniest things. I didn't invite friends over because I was too embarrassed about Mom and Dad making a scene, and dating was a sore subject since the day I hit puberty, which meant not bothering to ask about boys because I knew what the answer would be. While everybody around me had a social circle that they'd invite sleepovers with or go to birthday parties for, I was dreaming of the day I'd break off and carve my own life.

d all in boring Caleb was always part of that because he'd always been there saving grace. He was the one consistent person I could depend on. I needed a break from my parents. He'd hold my hair back at parties when I decided to drink too much or carry me inside when I fell asleep during drives. I barely missed a football game when he signed on to Linden University and still spent summers working at the hardware store with him and his parents.

His family became mine.

A healthier one that I wasn't used to.

iversity parents But the problem with putting all your eggs in one basket is what happens after you drop them all.

I'd get I still love Caleb.

d never I love his heart.

I love his family.

I love everything he's ever done for me.

That's why I said no, so that I could give him the world back.

s at the house I still want kids...

campus I know you do.

"I don't think Raine is listening," Olive muses, tossing a balled-up

to relate me.

to our Skylar laughs. “She probably checked out after your ten-minute summary of *Star Wars* and why it’s better than *Star Trek*.”

Olive waves her off. “Ten minutes is impressive considering how many movies there are in the franchise. And you obviously weren’t lying in ways because the whole point of my rant was that you *can’t* compare them.”

“Sorry,” I apologize, rubbing my eyes. “It was a long day. Because of only a discount on certain coffee and pastries for anyone who came in dressed between twelve and five. The place was swamped.”

I’d be It’s hard to believe it’s Halloween already, but here we are. A few things walked in for my shift and Elena saw me without a costume, she made me wear cat ears and drew whiskers on my cheeks with eyeliner. She, on the other hand, was dressed to the nines as some sort of badass leather fairy answers supposedly based on a book series I haven’t read.

’d have “It’s fine,” Skylar reassures me. “We’re glad you were able to try I’d go tonight.”

“You still haven’t answered the question. What color is the pumpkin as my Olive cuts in, sipping the Shirley Temple she ordered from the waiter when I as Baby Yoda. “That could impact the name.”

when I Skylar scoffs, peeling a piece off the blooming onion that’s sitting in the long middle of the table. “Says the girl who names everything after her team characters no matter what they look like.”

and his “You can’t tell me that my betta fish didn’t look a *little* like Captain Rogers,” she argues, causing me to smile.

“How can a fish look like Captain America?” I ask.

Skylar gestures toward me. “*Exactly!* See, she gets my point. You know what happens looked like a fish. You should have named it Bubbles or Neon something.”

Olive crosses her arms over her chest, which is covered in a hockey jersey that still somehow does little to hide her double D. Her brother signed on with the professional team after he graduated and he’s getting a lot of airtime recently. She said she was dressed as his biggest fan for Halloween.

The hockey fanatic says, “I refuse to name any pet something that’s unoriginal.” She focuses on me. “Don’t let Skylar name your dog. Your napkin probably be something like Spot or Rover.”



“Hey!” Skylar laughs, clearly not fazed by her friend’s assumption. “I don’t think either of us are the best place to name anyone or anything.”

Olive starts to argue but stops herself, lifting her shoulders as if to say, “I’m not even sure I want to bring her up since she’s helping take care of my dad.”

I play with the straw wrapper I folded accordion style. “The puppy I was offered was gray, but I haven’t heard from Emma yet. So I might not even be able to see him.”

Both girls frown at me. Then Skylar says, “There’s still time. When she’s busy. You said she knew Caleb, right? You could always ask him for a good word for you or something.”

We didn’t do a whole lot of talking the last time we saw each other, so I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Would I have a right to ask him for a puppy?”

I’m not even sure I want to bring her up since she’s helping take care of my dad. It might be a sensitive topic. “No, I’ll let it be. What’s meant to happen, right?”

Each of them nods, but they look at me like I might break down any second.

Thankfully, Skylar decides to change the subject. “I think you should come with me to the football party. Olive is coming, and Danny will be there. It’ll be fun.”

Clearing my throat, I grab my water and take a long sip to quench my thirst. “I don’t think that’d be a very good idea. I’ve been trying to find my own people and give them some space. You know?”

Even though she doesn’t seem happy about it, Skylar nods. “I understand.”

“Agreed,” Olive chips in.

Still, Skylar says, “But if Caleb is there, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing. You two are both on campus and the town is small. There are rules saying you can’t both be at the same place at the same time. Danny misses having you around. You’re the voice of reason, and he needs it sometimes.”

My lips twitch. “Still trying to get you to agree to a tortoise?”

She blows out a breath. “Yep. I think it may be a losing battle point. He’s hell-bent.”

on. “I’d That’s a conversation for another time, I guess. “All I want is t  
e in the sure Caleb is happy. And I don’t know if he can be if I keep show  
places. I already took over Bea’s. It’s obvious he tries to avoid th  
to say when I’m working. I know DJ and Matt like the coffee, but they don  
two cups at a time, especially not one that’s specifically Caleb’s order.  
y I saw Skylar winces. I’m sure she knows her boyfriend has been si  
getting coffee and snacks to Caleb so he wouldn’t have to see me. I get  
probably do the same if I were him.

Maybe Olive decides to change the subject back to puppies. “I still think t  
n to put should consider something cool for your dog’s name when you get or  
Kylo Ren or Darth Vader.”

er, so I That has me smiling for real this time, grateful neither of these g  
i favor? giving me a hard time for the decision I made about Caleb.

e of his They probably accepted I’ve made up my mind.

be will Now I just need my own mind—and heart—to accept it.

at any



should ELENA IS SITTING on the counter during a slow time at the bakery and sv  
e there, her legs back and forth while hounding me with questions. “Why not?  
be a great test study.”

my dry I pull apart some of the croissant I took from the display and pop  
to give my mouth, praying I’m able to keep it down. After my night out at  
ie guys with the girls, I went home and researched everything I’d need to g  
dog while nibbling on some of Mom’s leftover Thai food. Since neith  
“That’s cooks, our fridge is full of takeout boxes. Now I’m guessing they ha  
old food we should have thrown out a while ago.

Regret has definitely settled into my stomach because I’ve been f  
h a bad the urge to vomit since I heated up the mango chicken. I couldn’t at  
n’t any miss work, especially since I’m picking up my four-legged friend in  
e. Plus, hours. When Emma texted me before I left the open mic, it felt like f  
e really finally on my side.

I don’t have Caleb anymore.

But I’ll have *someone*.

at this A dog of my own like I always wanted.

o make      Something else to focus on.

ving up      Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I pop another tiny portion  
e placecroissant into my mouth and answer the teenager. “You’re seventeen  
’t drinkWhat do you know about relationships?”

”              She scoffs, putting her hands on her hips in offense. “I watch real  
reakingRaine. It’s basically all the research I need. I could make something  
: it. I’dyour project that would blow your teacher’s mind. What better case s  
there than something based on those awful reality dating shows t  
hat younothing but drama?”

ie. Like      Even though that’d be entertaining, I shake my head. “I appreci  
offer, but I don’t think your extensive knowledge on *The Bachelor* ar  
girls areIsland is going to help me with this assignment. Plus, I already  
someone, and I think I may still get my mom to change her mind about  
it.”

She blows out a raspberry and glances at the window where a few  
kids are walking by in groups. “Did you ask Caleb?”

Her question gives me pause. “You think I asked my *ex-boyfri*  
help on my project about *romantic* relationships?”

vinging      She’s quiet for a second before shrugging as if there’s nothing  
I couldwith that. “I don’t see why you couldn’t. He’d probably agree if you  
him. He still loves you.”

o it into      I’m staring down at my snack absentmindedly, so she doesn’t  
Hulbertdoubt on my face. After my last exchange with Caleb, I’m not so sur  
et for aright. And I don’t know if I want her to be. He deserves to have some  
er of ussure about him, and it’d be unfair for me to go back on everything I  
d somehim through only to change my mind. While I don’t regret making lo  
him, I know it was a mistake because it puts us back to square one  
ightingwe’re both as confused as when I told him I couldn’t marry him.

fford to      “It’s not going to happen” is all I say as I push off the counter a  
1 a fewworking on the project Bea gave me earlier. She and Elena made cu  
ate wasitem tags to put in the display case so people could see what everyt  
instead of trying to look on the chalkboard above the coffee mach  
figure it out.

“Why not?” the stubborn girl behind me pries, not seeming to car  
don’t want to talk about it. “If it’s not Caleb you asked, who is i  
another man?”

“Lena—”

of the “Look!” She smacks my shoulder a little too hard, causing me to  
Lena. my flesh with the sharp pair of scissors instead of the paper I was supp  
slice. “He’s coming in right now!”

ity TV, Hissing at the pain as blood instantly starts dripping down my  
up for back away from the counter and watch as the teenager’s face pales be  
study is once she sees the red droplets.

hat are “Oh my God!” She jumps down and races over to where one  
dishcloths is before running over and pressing it against my bleedin  
iate the “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to do that. I just got ex  
nd Love The cloth pressing against the cut looks stained and smells like  
asked “Did you give me a fresh cloth or a dirty one?”

it doing She gapes at the stained cloth. “I—I don’t know. I panicked.”

I put as much pressure as I can stand on the wound that hurts li  
college before staring down at the mess on the countertop and floor.

“What happened?” a rushed voice behind us asks. I know wh  
end for without turning around. I’ve heard the tone a time or two in the past w  
clumsy self would accidentally trip or fall. Like when I was sevente  
wrongslipped on a patch of ice at Lindon High School on the way to my  
asked bruised my butt *and* my pride in front of a group of classmates. That  
third time I’d fallen that winter, and Caleb’s dad teased me about hav  
see the kind of talent to trip over painted lines.

re she’s Elena says, “She cut herself. Oh God, there’s so much blood.” She  
body be away, making a face that tells me she doesn’t do well with it. “I’m  
’ve put Raine. I saw Caleb walking in and wanted to let you know.”

ve with I don’t have time to worry about what the man in question must t  
: where that because red is quickly seeping through the dirtied white materia  
getting God knows what into the wound.

nd start Suddenly, Caleb is by my side, grabbing my wrist carefully and  
te little the cloth toward him like the mother hen he’s always been. He peels b  
thing is cloth to check the injury and curses under his breath when he sees w  
ines to I’m too scared to look at.

“This is going to need stitches or glue,” he tells me gently. He p  
re that I Elena. “Get a new cloth for her. I’m taking her to the hospital.”

it? Is it “Caleb, I’m—”

“Don’t say you’re fine. You aren’t. We both know this is going to

get checked out or you could get an infection. Let's just set things betw  
cut into side for right now and get you taken care of."

osed to *Set things aside.* As if it's that easy.

Elena jogs over with a fresh cloth, this one definitely clean, and gi  
hand, I another apologetic look. "I'm sorry again, Raine. I'll tell Grandma  
side metake money out of my paycheck to make sure you get the rest of your p

It's a sweet thought, but I don't have time to tell her not to worry  
of the before I'm being pulled around the counter and toward the front door  
g hand, people are starting to walk in.

cited." "Caleb, Lena can't be here by herself."

coffee. He doesn't seem to care as he takes his jacket off and starts puttin  
me before the cold air hits us. "How much help are you going to b  
you're bleeding half to death?"

ike hell It's a logical question, albeit a tad bit dramatic. "I'm not blee  
death. Can you at least call Bea? Or let me call her to make sure Lena  
to it is okay?"

hen my I don't have to look at him to know the sigh is one of exasperatic  
en and call Bea when we get you to the hospital. Lena has run things on h  
car and before. She'll be fine. And *don't*"—he pins me with a serious exp  
was the—"argue with me right now."

ving the Pressing my lips together, I nod once and let him help me into th  
He's being excessive, careful not to touch me but there in case I l  
e back balance. People always joked that he was the parental figure in  
I sorry, situation—the DD when the boys went out drinking, the persc  
collected keys at house parties, and the go-to to call on whenever som  
hink of needed help. I don't know whether to believe he's being helpful now b  
l that she still cares for me or because this is just who he is as a person.

The ride to the hospital is short since it's only a few blocks from h  
pulling could have walked if Caleb didn't think I would keel over at any secur  
ack the blood loss.

hatever It isn't until we're inside the emergency room at the check-in des  
trust myself to face him and say, "You don't have to stay."

oints to One of his brows pops up as he accepts the clipboard with paperv  
it. "How are you going to get back?"

It's hard not to smile. "It's not even a ten-minute walk back to  
need to Less than that if I cross over on Pine from Maple Avenue."

ween us “First of all, it’s November and cold. You’re freezing even summertime. You’d be half-frozen by the time you made it back bakery. Second, do you honestly think Bea is going to let you work the ives me your shift after you get back?”

Bea to “I’d most likely get double-teamed by Bea and Caleb and told to go day.” and rest.

about it “It’s a little cut,” I argue, my good hand gripping the jacket that’s r wherefor me.

He grumbles, “We’ll see about that.”

And we do.

ing it on Because despite me telling him, on three different occasions, that e when go home instead of staying with me, he helps me fill out the paperwork comes back to the room with me. His eyes are trained on me from w ding to sits in the corner—on my hand and on every little movement that the will be Salvatore, makes as he examines what’s under the saturated cloth.

“All right, I’m going to have you keep this wrapped up. One n. “I’ll doctors will come check it out too, but I’m pretty sure it’s going to nee er own glue. The nick isn’t too deep, but it’s in a sensitive spot, which is v ression bleeding so much. The doctor on call tonight will confirm when he with his other patient.” Salvatore grabs a plastic cup with an orange ca e truck, passing it to me. “I’ll need you to try giving me a urine sample too, ose my out pregnancy. If stitches are necessary, we’ll give you medication r every with the pain.”

n who My stomach drops at the P-word. “I’m not,” I tell him quickly, to nobody to even look in my ex-boyfriend’s direction. What would he see on my because we locked eyes?

Too much.

ere. We The nurse gives me an empty smile, as if he delivers this speech id from time to the frantic women who have to provide samples before tre “It’s hospital policy.”

k that I From the corner of my eye, I see Caleb shift as he stares down sample cup. He remains silent, his hands tucked into the crooks of h work on from how they’re draped tensely over his chest.

Shoulders dropping, I accept the cup and head to the bathroom ac Bea’s hall.

I wish I could have told the nurse that this was pointless, and

in their irritates the anger that I've had to bury deep, deep inside me since I went to the by my gynecologist that I had a future of struggles ahead of me.  
rest of *"It'll be a very hard journey, and you may need to make some decisions," Dr. Fields says, giving me the sympathetic smile I'm sure she gives all the patients she tells bad news to. "This isn't the end of the Raine."*

too big But it was.

I knew the day I was told I had advanced endometriosis it was the my world. The one I'd get to share with Caleb for the rest of our lives that ugly green monster still lives inside me whenever I think about he can could have been if things were different.

ork and I'd be happier.

here he Healthier.

e nurse, With the love of my life.

Instead, my body decided to revolt against me and ruin the one chance of the got.

nd some I debate on putting my hand through the mirror so I don't have to why it's the reflection of the broken girl anymore but decide I've already done 's done damage to myself for one day. So, nostrils flaring, I wash my hands and up on it, can after filling and putting the cup where I was told to and head back to rule where Caleb is waiting for me.

to help "You okay?" he asks after I settle back onto the stiff hospital bed.

I lift a shoulder, not sure how I am. I'm tired. Upset. Pissed off. Am I afraid of things that I can't tell him. It's better to be silent than lie. How do I face if possibly explain to him that I'm upset because I had to pee in a cup knowing there's a high probability that I'll never get pregnant?

Dark, heavy emotion hurts me at every corner.

all the It burns my eyes.

atment. Prickles the back of my neck.

Tightens my throat.

at the I have to keep my gaze pointed at the floor so he won't see all that is arm over, because I want nothing more than to scream.

After a few minutes of silence, save for the loud patients and machines across the other sectioned-off areas of the cold emergency room, Caleb asks, "Was Elena trying to get your attention about me anyway?"

it only Internally, I flinch as I toy with the zipper tab of his jacket that I





because I know what they'll find when they start digging. If they do  
image testing, they'll probably find more cysts and scarring. More reasons  
to look at the backaches and cramping. I don't need them to confirm anything  
I can't tell them that either.

Voice quiet, I say, "Okay."

I'm only brought back to reality when Caleb stands up and stares  
at me with narrowed eyes that I can't read.

"Caleb?" I ask, brows pinching at his darkened expression. "Are you  
leaving about..."

"Fuck," he curses, walking out of the tiny room before I can finish  
my question, fists tightened into balls on either side of his body as he goes

He doesn't look at me. Doesn't say another word. It leaves me gasping.  
Ms. the nurse, who only offers me a sympathetic smile.

What the hell just happened?

to stay

by for a  
the nurse.

on high  
as he'd  
else. We  
missions.  
tell me.  
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words,

because I know what they'll find when they start digging. If they do more image testing, they'll probably find more cysts and scarring. More reasons for the backaches and cramping. I don't need them to confirm anything, but I can't tell them that either.

Voice quiet, I say, "Okay."

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"Caleb?" I ask, brows pinching at his darkened expression. "Are you—"

"Fuck," he curses, walking out of the tiny room before I can finish the question, fists tightened into balls on either side of his body as he goes.

He doesn't look at me. Doesn't say another word. It leaves me gaping at the nurse, who only offers me a sympathetic smile.

What the hell just happened?

## Chapter Eighteen

# CALEB

*SHE'S GOT TO be pregnant.*

The thought rips through every single barrier I put up as I remember time we've had unprotected sex. She told me it was fine. Why would she panic about that? Why else would she not look me in the eye when she was peeing in that cup or when the nurse came in asking questions? I've panicked before, so I know the look well at this point. But this isn't because I forgot to do a homework assignment or study for an exam.

*Fuck.*

It takes me a few minutes to cool down in the hallway, with cautious nurses staring at me from the far side of the reception area, but I'm calm enough to go back into the room my ex is still sitting in.

It's just Raine when I enter through the parted curtains, her face pale as when I walked away, except her eyes stay locked on the floor and one of her hands gently cups her lower stomach.

I ask one thing: "Whose is it?"

It's only then her eyes slowly, *so slowly*, lift to mine. The deep color is full of distance and shock.

Then she blinks. "What?" she whispers, another blink doing little to clear the cloudiness. Her voice is so quiet I almost don't hear it, but what I do sense is the crack in her tone.

Is she really going to play dumb right now? There was a reason she did those things, and it was obvious that caught up with her.

"Chris texted me over the summer," I tell her, eye twitching with the memory of the message I got from the douche who was obviously trying to get a rise from me. It worked. It stung then, and it's ten times worse now considering the current situation. "He basically told me what happened."

Is it hypocritical to be pissed that she was involved with other men that summer when I've been seeing Emma? Yeah. But it doesn't suck a

knowing it was somebody I knew. Someone I hung out with, *with* Raine

It's never fun having to accept that someone you love has moved on without you.

*Chris: Tell Raine I'm sorry about what happened between us*

Chris wanted to piss me off by sending that text, especially since I was along with everyone with fucking eyes—know he's had a thing for her a long time. The quiet ones will always be the sneakiest, so I'm not surprised that he made a move as soon as he could. I just didn't think she'd be so stupid to fall for his nice guy routine. There was always something I'd heard told to me about him, and I doubt I was the only one who thought so. "Chris?" she repeats, shaking her head as if she has no idea what I'm using to talk about.

"Chris," I confirm, fists tightening again.

"Caleb, I don't know what you're talking about or what you need to think a few more times. What did Chris say happened?"

What I'm thinking is that my ex-girlfriend dumped me to date other people because she was worried she'd be settling for me without knowing what and *who* else was out there. Does that hurt like hell knowing I've given her everything she could have ever wanted? Yes, it does. Would I be naive not to put some sort of barrier back up to protect myself now that she's back?

I don't want to think the worst of her, because there's not a bad bone in Raine's body. But I can't ignore what's happened since I got down on my knees. It's not too far off to assume that she got into something this serious that's going to be one hell of a problem to get out of.

Loosening my fists, I admit, "I'm not sure what to think anymore, but I scrub the side of my face and close my eyes for a moment. "I used to think this would be *us*. We'd be here, excited about a baby. It could have been before you dumped me for anyone else to make sure you had a tiny something different just to be sure."

A sharp breath comes from her that has me opening my eyes. "You can't be more wrong than you are right now, and I don't like what you're implying, Caleb. You're upset, I get it. But I suggest you take a breath before you say one more thing."

ie.           *Take a breather?* A dry, disbelieving laugh escapes me that I  
ved oneyebrows rising in inquiry. “Answer me this. Was it worth it?”

There’s a brief pause where we stare at each other, hurt shadow  
features. It no doubt mirrors my own. “Was what worth it?”

Pathetically, I whisper, “Breaking us up. Hooking up with people.  
ice I—*that* shit worth *this*?” I gesture toward her stomach, eyes focusing a li  
er for a hard on her torso hidden beneath my unzipped jacket and a typical t  
hocked Bea’s logo on the corner pocket. The baggy material offers no insig  
be that what lies underneath.

a little Raine stares at me for a few long, tense seconds before she rep  
herself so she’s facing me. “Listen to me right now, Caleb Zachery  
hat I’m because I’m only going to say this *one* time.”

My eyebrows shoot up at her hard tone and angry gaze. I’m smart  
not to say anything before she enlightens me on whatever I need to be  
must be learned a time or two in the past that it’s not smart to cut in whe  
feeling feisty, especially when the middle name is dropped. Excep  
e other times typically led to something a lot more fun in apology than  
nowing anticipate this conversation will lead to.

“I’ve had sex with *one person*”—she sticks up her good hand wi  
the pointer finger up, though I’m sure that’s not the one she’d prefe  
es. But—“since the breakup. *One*. If you’re as good at math as you used to  
myself—can figure out who that person is. And even if that were different, yo  
bone in no reason to judge me for sleeping with anyone else when we’re not to

on one “I was *confused* and *lost* when you asked me to marry you. Th  
summer truth. I had a lot to think about that would impact *both* of our lives if I  
I hurt you, and I’ve already told you how sorry I am for that. But thi  
Raine.”temper tantrum you’re throwing is ridiculous. You have no idea what  
to think talking about right now. I’m not pregnant, you *goddamn* jackass.” Sh  
e been, at me with tears springing into her eyes that she quickly blinks away  
aste of conversation is not helping anything. I know you’re going through a l  
now, but I am too. I don’t need you being mean to me to add to it. So  
you should go.”

u could She’s really only ever been with me?

you’re The thought comes crashing into me.

breather Because I haven’t just been with her.

My throat thickens. “Raine—”

has her “I said *go*, Caleb. You don’t need to be here. Thanks for the ride, figure out how to get home. You’ve done enough.”

ing her The curtain moves behind me, and a throat clears, turning my a over my shoulder to see Emma standing there. Her eyebrows arch Was alllooks between Raine and me and says, “I think you should listen to little toofriend. Come on.”

ee with She doesn’t work on this floor, which means one of her coworke ht as tohave paged her to come down and get me before I made more of a

Great. That means the chances of Dad hearing that I’m here with Ra ositionspretty likely. Whenever he’s not sleeping, he’s listening to the Anders,surrounding this place, whether it’s with patients or staff.

Raine looks between me and Emma, whose hand is on my sh enoughtrying to get me to turn around and follow her out. There’s surprise ar. I’veface that I can’t figure out. They wouldn’t know each other, would the n she’s My ex’s expression drains, turning into an empty void that offe t thoseemotion. “It looks to me like I’m not the one who’s been bus what Igraduation. So don’t be a hypocrite. It’s not a good look on you.”

Swallowing, I feel a lump in the back of my throat that makes it th onlytalk. My voice is hoarse when I say, “I just assumed that you...”

r using Emma squeezes my shoulder. “Come on.”

be, you “The fact that you assumed I screwed *Chris* says a lot more abo ou havethan it does me. And you know what? Just so we’re clear, he kisse together. never kissed him back though. If he claimed anything else happened b at’s theus, it’s his hurt pride talking.”

agreed. “I made a mistake. I—”

s? This “I did too, by having sex with you again,” she says, cutting me off : you’relooking away from me to end the conversation. “So much for it being e lookstime thing, huh? I was dumb enough to think that it somehow wou 7. “Thisyou. That it would make both of us feel better, like our company alw ot rightbefore. We were *both* emotional that day, and that night in the truc I thinklook where it led us. Fighting. Pointing fingers.”

Heart tightening, all I can do is stare.

I guess she’s not wrong though.

The sex should have never happened, especially with this outcor there’s nothing we can do to change that now.

I step toward her, lowering my voice and asking, “You’re really r

but I'll My eyes dip down to her stomach again.

Her eyes stay focused on the section of curtain in front of her. V  
tentionshe replies, "No, I'm not."

as she Lips pressed together, I heave out a heavy sigh, feeling like a cc  
your...asshole. "What do we do now?"

"I'm going to get my hand fixed up, and you're going to go wi  
rs mustfriend." She says "friend" like she's in pain, still not bothering to so n  
t scene.glance in my direction for a heartbeat too long. Then she lets loose  
ine areclenches her eyelids closed for a moment, and opens them in my di  
gossip"But there is no 'we,' Caleb. Because the man I knew wouldn't have s  
of that to me."

oulder, My stomach drops. "I didn't mean it."

on her She leans back. "Yes, you did."

y? Knowing there's nothing I can say right now, I let Emma guide  
rs littlerealizing she more than likely heard what Raine said.

y after "I'm sorry," I tell the woman walking silently alongside me.

She shakes her head. "Don't."

hard to "Emma—"

She stops walking and looks at me. "I knew in my gut that  
anything with you was a mistake. I went against that feeling. That's  
out youEverything else is on you though. You shouldn't have led me on or  
d me. Iall that bullshit. It was messed up, Caleb."

etween I know she's right, so I don't bother refuting her. And I watch  
contemplates what more she wants to say before she gives up and  
away.

coolly, When I get up to Dad's floor, I see him standing by the window,  
; a one-heavily on the IV pole tight in his grasp. As soon as I walk in, he slow  
ld helpand offers me a shaky smile even though he can see the scolding look  
ays didface.

k. And "You shouldn't be out of bed on your own," I start in on him, v  
over and putting a hand on his back to help stabilize him as he turns  
"What if you fell and nobody was around to hear or help?"

He laughs, but it quickly turns into a dry cough that shakes hi  
ne. Buttorso. I manage to guide him to the chair in the corner and help him s  
until he waves me off. "I'm fine, I'm fine. What are you doing here at  
not...?" I wasn't expecting you until later."

I shift on my feet, still feeling the weight on my shoulders from weakly, conversation I had only minutes ago downstairs. “It’s sort of complicated.”

I’m not sure...” Swallowing, I have no idea what to tell him. There’s a lot I need to process, and I haven’t had time to do that yet. “I fucked up big time.”

I mumble, threading my fingers through my hair as I start pacing across your room from him. “I don’t know what the hell to do, Dad.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it,” Dad says, voice gentle.

I close my eyes for a moment, tipping my head back and then stare at the ceiling. “I thought Raine was pregnant. And I thought...it wasn’t. She’s downstairs getting stitches in her hand. She’ll be okay though.”

Dad is quiet. “That’s a lot to take in. I’m glad to hear she’ll be okay.” Another pause. “I take it you two have seen each other since the last time then? Heard you might have been seeing each other, but you didn’t tell me out, up. Especially since you’re seeing Emilia.”

My lips twitch. “It’s Emma,” I correct him. I don’t typically tell my parents about my whereabouts these days, but there’s no point in denying it. “She and I weren’t really dating. Not exclusively anyway. I know it doesn’t justify me seeing Raine though.”

He hums.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I say, “If she were pregnant, it would have been mine. And that messed me up because I always wanted to be a dad if she were and it wasn’t my kid...I would have had to see her live as she dream I always pictured with her but without me in it. I got so angry.”

Dad nods in understanding, but I doubt he truly gets the irritation leaning guilt threatening to bubble over. “I have no doubt you’ll get that someday. But if it’s not in the picture right now, then that’s for the best. I have more important things to focus on.”

I look at him, studying his glassy eyes as they watch me and his walking frame that seems even smaller than it did a week ago. He’s deteriorating around front of my eyes, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. “How do I do it?”

“Do what?”

I look at him with wary eyes. “Be a father. Be a good man. How do you do that when there’s always something trying to hold you back or tear you down?”

“Because I don’t know how to balance everything right now, Dad.”



om the like..." How can I tell him I'm drowning? I'm being suffocated by the  
licated. of all my responsibilities, yet I still would have added a baby to the r  
s a lot I came down to it.

g time," Because it'd be with Raine.

ross the Because it could have given me the future I saw for myself a lon  
ago.

He's quiet for a moment before letting out a small sigh. "I don't kn  
ring up I look up at him in confusion. "You don't know what?"

't mine. "I don't know how I did it. Be a father. Be a good man. I  
something you figure out along the way. I'm by no means perfect. No  
okay." ever is. Anger still gets to me. There are days, long before now, whe  
reakup defeated. You think you fucked up now? Just wait. You're going  
bring itscrewing up, but you'll learn from those mistakes and grow from the  
son?"

tell my All I do is stare, his image becoming blurry from panicked tears  
ying it. that I can't find the energy to fight anymore.

ow that "If there's anybody who can make the most out of life no ma  
obstacles," he tells me, voice the same gentle tone that it is when he of  
sincere advice, "it's you. The only thing somebody needs to know ho  
ld have is love, and you've always been full of that. At the end of the day, i  
ad. But you express it, accept it, and distribute it despite all the challenges that  
out thea difference."

fucking I don't know what it is about that statement that makes me break  
doesn't take long before I'm sitting on my father's hospital bed cryin  
ion and the man who raised me makes his way over slowly to comfort me des  
future own battles. For once, I don't feel bad about showing any weakness, l  
st. You my father is here to help me through it. His belief in me eases some  
pressure that'd been sitting on my chest for far too long.

narrow A man's love. A father's love.

ating in If that's the secret to being a good person, then I've had the b  
do you model.



do you  
st you? I KNOW WHAT'S coming when I see Emma approach me as I'm putting  
It feels



urses onlooking me in the eye. “Yeah. I obviously wanted to believe that too.  
ring mewewe’re both idiots.”

l if they As she starts to walk away, I reach out to gently grab her wrist. “W  
of them Her wary eyes look over her shoulder at me before she carefully ta  
arm back.

“How much are you selling the dogs for?”

Emma blinks slowly, staring at me as she soaks in that question. T  
me yousays, “You want to buy it for her, don’t you?”

I cringe, realizing how fucked up that is.

7. Even She scoffs. “Of course you do.” Wetting her lips, she shakes her h  
“Rainerubs her tired eyes. “You’re such a dick, Caleb.”

me. It’s Then she walks away.

s out a  
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ey say.  
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r...”  
me feel  
ognized

into her  
ver the

finally

looking me in the eye. “Yeah. I obviously wanted to believe that too. I guess we’re both idiots.”

As she starts to walk away, I reach out to gently grab her wrist. “Wait.”

Her wary eyes look over her shoulder at me before she carefully takes her arm back.

“How much are you selling the dogs for?”

Emma blinks slowly, staring at me as she soaks in that question. Then she says, “You want to buy it for her, don’t you?”

I cringe, realizing how fucked up that is.

She scoffs. “Of course you do.” Wetting her lips, she shakes her head and rubs her tired eyes. “You’re such a dick, Caleb.”

Then she walks away.

## Chapter Nineteen

# RAINE

CALEB'S REACTION IN the hospital is the exact reason I chose to end things in the first place. He *wanted* there to be a baby, but there isn't. He *wants* a dad, but he can't be. Not with me. I saw it clear as day on his face just how devastated he was the second it soaked in that I wasn't about to give him what he dreamed of.

I'm not pregnant.

Not with his baby.

*Definitely* not with Chris's.

Every fear I had about saying yes to his proposal was solidified in the middle of the emergency room. I hate that I was right because that means there's no chance for us. Not again. But at least I got some justification knowing I wasn't completely out of hand with my choice.

*It's for the best*, I tell myself for the billionth time. If not now, it will have happened someday when things became too much.

That realization smacks me head-on as I sit in my bedroom surrounded by silence, knees drawn to my chest as I stare at the corkboard full of memories and pictures from over the years.

My light-pink room, with frilly curtains, decorative pillows, and stuffed animals lingering on the dresser, shelves, and bed, screams in my face when I'm anything but. I'd like to think the good intent behind the reason I'm not a saint makes up for the feelings I hurt along the way.

I'm not sure that's enough though.

Lowering my feet to the floor, I walk over to the corkboard and touch one of the pictures hanging there. It's ripped down the middle because I want to see the other person whose arm is still seen around me next to me in the pool in Radcliff.

It was summer, and I'd been excited to see my friends in Virginia because that Caleb wasn't going to be there. We were new, nothing serious, s

myself it was good to miss him, good to have our space. People who are always near each other tend to get on each other's nerves from what I can tell.

"Come on, Raine," Collin teases, lowering his phone to look at the screen. "I know you can smile. Let's see it."

The boy next to me, Cody, puts his arm around my shoulder and leans into his side. He's more muscular than Caleb, and it makes me wonder if he plays sports too. Is he a football player? He seems like the baseball player I think I heard him and Chris talking about the Yankees and Red Sox earlier.

I also notice that he smells nice. Whatever cologne or body spray he's wearing isn't too strong. I can't help but take a small breath to try to figure out what scent is coming from him. It's woody and floral at the same time, New compared to what I'm used to.

"Did you just smell me?" he asks, a lopsided grin on his face.

Instantly, my face blossoms with heat. "I...uh... Sorry."

He winks, causing my face to pinken even more. "Don't be. You're beautiful. Whatever you want to me."

There's no doubt he's flirting, which makes a nervous laugh bubble up from my lips.

I think briefly about Caleb. We aren't officially dating yet, so flirting with him is against the rules. Right? I see girls flirt with Caleb all the time, especially cheerleaders who go up to him after the games. It doesn't make me feel awkward when I see him laugh at whatever they're saying, but I know I've got no chance with him.

Maybe that's why I settle into Cody's side and grin at Collin as he holds up his phone to snap more photos of the group.

Cody is cute—a blond surfer wannabe compared to Caleb's dark-dark-eyed, all-American thing. They're both cute in their own ways, and I think I both seem to like me. It strokes my ego a little because there's something particularly special about me. My hair is a frizzy dark red mess that I don't know what to do with, I barely wear makeup because I have no idea how to apply it much less make it look good, and I'm not the best at conversation without coming off as awkward.

Yet here's an attractive boy who keeps smiling at me, finding tiny ways to touch me whenever we're near each other, and flirting enough to make me blush regardless of how I see myself.

who are *It feels good to be wanted, and that makes me feel like any other girl. Suddenly, I understand why those cheerleaders want the attention so much. It's fun.*

*That's why after a while I stop thinking about Caleb altogether and tugs me in the moment with my summer friends.*

er if he *Which is why I follow Cody inside that night when he asks if I want to go somewhere quieter to talk. And we do. We talk about our favorite music, listen to some of their best songs on YouTube, talk about movies, hobbies, and everything in between.*

ay he's *We never bring up what our lives are like outside summer—what we're going back to. It's easier that way. Safer.*

ie time. *That night, I lose my virginity to the smooth-talking summer boy I never see or speak to again.*

*It was awkward and fumbled, and it'd hurt. When all was said and done, I lay in bed alone after he got dressed and left, claiming he couldn't be out past curfew again. I wondered if anybody would notice the difference. I heard sex could do that to people.*

ble past *A few months later, I did notice a change. When I woke up in my room, I was in pain, an excruciating amount of pain and blood covering my sheets. It wasn't legs. I'd had bad periods before, but this didn't feel the same as normal. I'd had plenty of experience since starting my cycle at eight years old. It felt great again, it'd been over two months since I'd had one at all, which I claim to stress.*

*I'd felt horrible for sleeping with Cody—for giving him what I had given Caleb.*

*But when I drove myself to Planned Parenthood the next morning, I was alone. I was alone because I didn't want to ask Mom or Dad to take me to the doctor, and they would completely stop me.*

nothing *"You suffered a miscarriage. I'm sorry for your loss," the woman in the lab coat tells me, putting her hand on mine in comfort.*

no idea *Life hit me harder than it ever did that day, and I couldn't tell anyone. Not Mom. Not Dad. Definitely not Caleb. And there'd been no way to tell the boy who was the father to my unborn baby, because it wasn't as if he was part of my life. I didn't have his number. Didn't know his last name. One conversation with him led to a life-altering reality for me.*

*It was all downhill from there. I just didn't know it yet.*

*teenage* Blinking slowly, I grab the picture from that day in Radcliff, study  
*thletes'* visible of Cody's arm, and grind my teeth. I crumple the print and toss  
my wastebasket. Then I do the same with another picture from that sur  
*nd stay* And another.

And another.

*it to go* Until I'm tearing the corkboard off the wall and throwing it onto the  
*sic and* with hands shaking from anger.

*obbies,* With blurry eyes, I stare at the ruined images scattered on the  
"Stupid," I whisper to myself. "You were so *stupid*."

*or who* Clenching my eyes closed to stop the tears from falling, I inhale  
and kick the corkboard before dropping onto the edge of my bed and  
*who I'd* at the mess I made.

My whole body is shaking, making me wrap my arms around myself  
*done, I* squeeze.

*caught* I'm *angry*.

*ence in* For the losses I've suffered.

For the sacrifices I've had to make.

*own bed* I endured so much and had nobody to help me get through it. *A*  
*rets and* worst part? Nobody can, especially not now.

*ial, and* My body *failed me*, and I have no control over it. No answers. No  
*d. Then* I've had to silently grieve the loss of two different lives—the one of the  
*lked up* I'd never get to know, and the one of the person I was before I even  
out. Because the moment I heard the news, I realized I'd never be the same

*should* Standing, I sniff back tears and step on the pictures as I walk out  
bedroom.

*g all by* Mom is gone again.

*ctor, my* No note.

No text.

*n in the* No phone call.

She's probably with Dad.

*ybody.* Feeling suffocated in the house, unable to be on my own right  
tell the walk outside to see an unfamiliar vehicle pull up at the front cur  
was in eyebrows dart up when I see Emma step out of the driver's side and ro  
decision front of the car. When she sees me, she looks as on guard as I am, an  
when I know we're aware of the other person's involvement with Cale

Rubbing my arm with my good hand, I take a deep breath so she



what's see the breakdown I'm on the verge of and walk over to her. "Hi."  
s it into Her gray eyes go from me to the house, then back to me again. D  
nmer. see the defeat in my eyes? The exhaustion? Or does she see someo  
helped hurt her with the boy she obviously has a thing for? I coul  
when she touched his arm to walk him out of the room.

re floor "I asked around to get your address. Hope that's okay."

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I release it and say, "I gu  
carpet.depends on if you're here to hit me or not."

Emma smiles faintly. "You're safe. I've never been much of a figh  
deeply Me either. I guess Caleb has a type.

staring We're quiet, staring at each other.

Then I say, "I didn't know."

self and She doesn't need me to elaborate.

"Neither did I," she replies. There's a pause, more shifting in disc

"Or maybe I did in a way. Subconsciously, I knew Caleb still loved yo

I don't tell her about my cluelessness to her presence in his life be  
wouldn't do any good now. Why keep hurting people's feelings with th  
And theif a lie could save them even the slightest bit of pain?

"I have something for you," she tells me, walking over to the ba  
o relief.of her car.

re baby I gape at the wiggling gray puppy she takes into her arms that's  
r foundher face. "Oh my God," I whisper, walking over to get a better look. "

same. think you'd still sell me one after the hospital. I wouldn't have blamed  
t of my She looks down at the dog before passing him to me, watchin

quickly wrap him up in my arms. "To be honest, I was debating on l  
him out of spite. But what happened wasn't your fault. Not entirely. "

going to be petty because of everything that went down, especially  
promised my parents I'd help find good homes for these little guys."

The softness in her voice makes me realize she's being genuine.  
you."

now, I She doesn't look at me but at the puppy when she says, "I figur  
rb. Mycould use a good, stable companion now more than ever." Reaching  
und thescratch the dog's back, she lifts her gaze upward and adds, "We both  
d that'sBecause I don't think Caleb is capable of being that for anybody right

b. Is that her way of saying things with Caleb and her are over? Be  
doesn'tmay not know the specifics, but it's obvious that there was *something*

choose not to ask. It's safer that way.

oes she Probably for both of us.

ne who "How much do I owe you?"

l see it Emma steps back, sliding her hands into her jacket pockets. "Nothing taken care of already."

My brows pinch in confusion. "What do you mean?"

ess that The girl standing in front of me, still in her scrubs, sighs. "I'll never what happened between the two of you, but it's obviously not big enter." make him care any less. I'm looking forward to the day I can experience kind of loyalty, even after heartbreak."

Is she saying what I think she is?

I look down at the dog, whose tongue quickly finds my chin in kisses.

omfort. Emma walks back to her car, stopping before she climbs inside u." watches me for a second before shaking her head. "Good luck cause it everything."

he truth I'm too slow to respond before she gets inside and drives away.

When I walk up to the front door, I see Mr. Applebee outside his back door with a rake, working on the fallen orange and yellow leaves coating otherwise green lawn. "Got a new friend there?" he asks, nodding toward lickingsquirmy puppy who clearly wants to be set down.

I didn't I force a smile, but it feels too heavy to be believable. "I'm trying you." avoid the loneliness thing. What better way than with a dog?"

ng as I He leans against the rake handle. "My Annemarie used to say that keeping times we're feeling loneliest are typically when we need to be by our I'm not the most."

when I My brows pinch. "That doesn't make any sense to me."

One of his shoulders lifts as he fights off what I imagine is a "Thank smile. "Well, she also told me that bacon was going to kill me someday switched us to that nasty low-fat, low-sodium turkey alternative, so I'd red you she had no idea what she was talking about."

over to That gets me to crack a smile of my own.

I could. Scratching the puppy between his ears to get him to calm down, I now." toward my house. "I should go in and get him settled."

because I I guess I also need to buy him some things since I never got around there. I Mom isn't going to be very happy, but I'm sure he'll grow on her.

“Are we still meeting tomorrow afternoon?” he asks, taking up his fork again. “I’ve been thinking a lot about those pastries you’ve told me about.”

I want to ask him to reschedule, but I don’t want to risk him backing out of the project. Enough of my life is at risk because of my choices; I need my grade for this class to be at risk too. “Tomorrow. Right?”  
“Pastries are on me. Unless Annemarie said something about them before, I don’t know for you too.”

Leon pats his stomach. “Only for the weight, but I clearly don’t care that about that. Too damn old to care about the little things.”

Snorting, I murmur, “Yeah, I’ve definitely gained some weight since I started working there.” I brush the thought off and force a bigger smile. “I’ll be happy you tomorrow, Leon,” I call out, carefully opening and pushing the door with my injured hand.

After setting a few towels down on the floor for my unnamed new member, I pull out my phone to see a few unanswered messages.

*Mom: I won’t be home until late tonight. There’s money on the counter for you to order pickup.*

*Caleb: I’m sorry about earlier. We need to talk about all of this.*

Choosing to ignore both like they’ve ignored me in the past, I turn my phone off and sit on the edge of my bed, staring at the empty corkboard. It seems appropriate. It’s a clean slate wiped away by a tsunami of regret. The only way to move on is to rebuild from the ground up.

The whining coming from the floor has me moving my gaze from the trash bin full of old photos and toward the puppy that’s officially beginning for me. “What am I going to name you?”



Almost a  
day. She

GRABBING THE TWO plates with heated muffins on them from Elena, I walk over to the corner table where Leon is waiting for me. He’s got a cane leaning against the wall, a steaming cup of tea in front of him, and a curious expression on his face as he studies the other tables of students having lunch.

“Here,” I say, putting his cheesecake muffin down in front of him.

his rake Sliding into the seat across from him with my chocolate chip muffin out.” I push it to the side and move my water to make room for my notebook.

ing out I’m a little scatterbrained as I search for a pen in my bag, and my neighbor notices my flustered movements. “Is everything okay?”

; yeah. Pausing, I let out a tiny breath. “Not really.” Cringing internally, I pull the writing utensil from my bag and drop it back onto the floor beside my feet. “Sorry, it’s not your problem. There’s a lot going on here.”

it care Leon drags his muffin closer. “I don’t suppose it’s anything I can help you with, is it?”

since I We’d be here all day if I started listing my problems, starting with the first. “Seeing her gone again when I woke up. If I hadn’t noticed the empty window or the lipstick stain on the counter or the missing slice of pizza from the

I would have assumed she never came home. But between that and the fact that she left on the fridge asking why she had to clean up a pee stain on the kitchen floor this morning, I knew she snuck in late before whatever happened she had with a client this morning.

izza I wanted to tell her about the new addition to our household last night, but I got it out of the way, but maybe it’s a good thing we avoided it. They would ask what happened to my hand and why I looked like I had been crying. Because I had been. Not because my hand hurt, which it could have. It was because my heart hurt. Then I’d need to explain the argument I got with Caleb and how he bought me a dog, which would take the conversation in an entirely new direction that would probably lead to an argument with her about why I need to get past my feelings.

a fresh I’m not ready for all that.

The smile I give my neighbor is genuine. “Helping me with this project is more than enough. Trust me. I asked my mom, but she wasn’t comfortable with the topic or having her business out there. Plus, she doesn’t spend much time at the house anymore, so finding time to work with her on it have been difficult.”

walking Leon nods in acknowledgment as he pulls the top of the muffin from the bag, and a body, just like my father always does. “It must have been hard when you were in college split.”

I’m quiet for a second. “It’s...different. But I think this is what’s best for everybody. They fought too much to make it work for the long term.”

I remember when Mrs. Applebee, Annemarie, once asked

in, I set everything was all right when she heard the yelling match going on in the house. I'd been staring at the front door, wondering if I should go in and break it up after a long day of school or if I should do another lap around the neighborhood in hopes they'd be done by the time I got back.

, I grab I was twelve.

side my Shaking it off, I clear my throat and click my pen open. "How long have you and your wife together?"

an help He lets the subject change easily. "This year will be fifty-eight together. We met at seventeen, got married at eighteen, and have been together ever since."

neglass "You still count them?"

he box, His nostalgic smile grows. "Even though she's been gone for four years now, she'll always be with me. She was my soulmate. I still feel her presence even on the bad days."

neeting "How did you know she was the one? That's a long time to be together with one person." I made it seven years before messing it all up, you know, I spent *decades* together. "Were you ever scared?"

then she Those eyebrows pop up. "Of what? Losing her? Sure. Thought there was a possibility a time or two. Have you seen me? I'm no Cary Grant—though I was his favorite actor. Had the biggest crush on him. But my Annemarie. She was a looker. I always thought that woman was the prettiest thing I ever saw in a matter of what she looked like. Bedhead, bad breath, and all. Never understood why she fell in love with me."

"But you never doubted it?"

The older man scratches at the white scruff on his chin. "Relationship? Nah. I was in it with her one hundred percent, and I know you were in it with me. That's what love is. It's not about giving fifty percent to somebody. Who wants a half-assed kind of love when you could each have your all no matter the circumstances?"

My stomach dips as I stare at the little notes I've been jotting down. Did I give him my all with Caleb, or was I only ever offering him half of myself when they were together? I didn't even try telling him about the diagnosis. There were a few moments it'd been on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth.

It was too late, everything had boiled over, and I couldn't say a thing. I should have given him my all, because I justified to myself that I couldn't.

side the After what happened with Cody, I'd pulled back a little from  
ide and wondering if it would turn into love at all if I was willing to t  
und the somebody else in the first place. Maybe that was the first sign tha  
going to self-sabotage early on.

*"Can I ask you something?" I say to Caleb, tapping the eraser  
ig were pencil against my marked-up math homework.*

*He looks over from where he's typing something on his dad's com  
it years "If it's about the trig homework, I don't know how much help I'll  
e been pretty sure I got half of the equations wrong even though I follow  
example problems she gave us."*

*I stare at the assignment for a second before setting my pencil dow  
ir years about what your dad said at dinner the other day. About how he kne  
re since mom was the one the first day he met her."*

*Caleb's full attention is on me now, interest piqued. "Yeah, he's st  
ogether for years. He always talks about the color of her lipstick and how h  
ret they had so much hair spray he was afraid it'd ignite if she got too close to  
they were at. What about that?"*

*Wetting my lips as I scrape my palms down my jeans, I say, "I  
hat was think that sort of thing is true? My parents have never said anything I  
...shoo about each other before."*

*In fact, they never talk about their past. Unlike Caleb's parents, w  
r quite reminiscing about their dating days, my parents seem to avoid the top  
it's the last thing they want to remember.*

*Caleb turns to me, his cheeks turning pink when he admits, "I th  
. "Our true. I knew I wanted you in my life the day I first saw you. It was t  
ew she time I ever came up to you in the hall at school."*

*I make a face. "But the day we started talking, I had spitballs in m  
give it from Sean Puglisi. They were so tangled I nearly cried. Mom even j  
few in my hair later that night."*

*He shrugs easily. "Yeah, but you didn't cry. And you didn't make  
myself, or be mean to him either, like Katie did when he did it to her. You jus  
out my him to stop. You were always nice to everyone, and I liked that."*

*Sean had started acting out after his grandpa died that year. Most  
Then it knew his grandparents were the ones who raised him. I figured  
I hadn't probably hurting and that was his way of showing it. Mom said Aunt  
did that when their father died. Grief does funny things to people.*

Caleb, “So you wanted me in your life because I was nice about the spitba  
oe with That pink in his cheeks deepens as he goes back to staring  
t I wascomputer screen. “I wanted you in my life for a lot of reasons. Spitba  
all. I just...knew.”

r of my My hand goes to a lock of my hair, absentmindedly touching the  
as if I’d find something gross tangled in there. When I don’t, I make  
mputer.lower my hand and move on to the next question. “Was there anythi  
be. I’mtwo disagreed on that threatened your relationship?”

ved the He chuckles. “Of course we disagreed. There isn’t one coup  
doesn’t have their fair share of arguments. If that threatens the relati  
n. “It’sthen you’re not with the right person.”

w your I find myself nodding, jotting down a single word and underli  
Secure.

aid that It makes me start to evaluate all the little things about the way I w  
ier hairCaleb, knowing that’s the last word I’d describe myself with. I don  
the fireLeon though, because he lost his wife. I may not have Caleb anymore  
least he’s still here.

Do you “You look deep in thought,” he notes.

ike that I snap myself out of it. “Sorry. Thinking.”

“About?” he presses with interest.

ho love Sighing, I reach for the muffin I have no appetite for. “Life. Love.”

ic as if Leon’s eyes glint with amusement. “Those are two things we ca  
little too lost in trying to figure out the answers to.”

ink it’s My head tilts as I take that in. “Isn’t it human nature to w  
he firstanswers?”

A thoughtful noise comes from him. “I suppose. Take it from an c  
ny hairwith a lot of life experience. The more we search for answers, th  
found aquestions we have. That’s no way to live your life, kid.”

a scene

it asked

people

he was

Tiffany

*“So you wanted me in your life because I was nice about the spitballs?”*

*That pink in his cheeks deepens as he goes back to staring at the computer screen. “I wanted you in my life for a lot of reasons. Spitballs and all. I just...knew.”*

My hand goes to a lock of my hair, absentmindedly touching the strands as if I'd find something gross tangled in there. When I don't, I make myself lower my hand and move on to the next question. “Was there anything you two disagreed on that threatened your relationship?”

He chuckles. “Of course we disagreed. There isn't one couple who doesn't have their fair share of arguments. If that threatens the relationship, then you're not with the right person.”

I find myself nodding, jotting down a single word and underlining it. *Secure.*

It makes me start to evaluate all the little things about the way I was with Caleb, knowing that's the last word I'd describe myself with. I don't envy Leon though, because he lost his wife. I may not have Caleb anymore, but at least he's still here.

“You look deep in thought,” he notes.

I snap myself out of it. “Sorry. Thinking.”

“About?” he presses with interest.

Sighing, I reach for the muffin I have no appetite for. “Life. Love.”

Leon's eyes glint with amusement. “Those are two things we can get a little too lost in trying to figure out the answers to.”

My head tilts as I take that in. “Isn't it human nature to want the answers?”

A thoughtful noise comes from him. “I suppose. Take it from an old man with a lot of life experience. The more we search for answers, the more questions we have. That's no way to live your life, kid.”



## Chapter Twenty

# CALEB

“DUDE,” MATT GROANS, setting his pen down on his notebook and back in the chair. “That’s the fourth time you sighed. Is your infrast homework as boring as it sounds or what?”

I stare down at the highlighted section of text I marked up fifteen r ago. I’ve read it three times, and nothing seems to be sticking. “I hav shit on my mind.”

“With your dad or...?”

None of my friends have asked about Raine, even though we’ve l the talk of the town since I escorted her from Bea’s with her blood wrapped. It hasn’t escaped people that we showed up to the hospital t but didn’t leave together. Have I been avoiding people so I wouldn’t talk about the events of that day? Yeah. But I can’t keep doing it forev

“Life,” I finally reply to Matt. Talking with Dad made me feel than I had been in a while. All the shit piling on me is still there, but I have people to talk to about it with who won’t judge me. Dad. Mc friends. “Can I ask you something? No bullshit answers either.”

Matt’s brows arch. “Uh, I guess.”

“You never really talk about your parents, so I don’t know wh situation is with them. But do you ever worry that something you do i to fuck everything up with them?”

He stares at me for a second. “Wow. Wasn’t expecting that.” My scrubs his neck. “My parents are good people. Blue collar. K themselves. I guess when you have something healthy with people, never really anything to talk about. I never think to bring them up. But yeah, they made my life good. Better than it probably would have bee had any other family.”

My brows pinch at the odd choice of words, and then they relax w sees the confusion on my face and says, “I was adopted. It was clos

parents are the only ones I know. Like I said, good people. Great actually.”

Wow. Nobody would have known that if he didn't say something even sort of looks like his dad.

leaning  
structure  
minutes  
re some  
become  
ly hand  
together  
need to  
er.  
calmer  
know I  
m. My  
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s going  
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n if I'd  
when he  
ed. My

Matt's shoulders lift nonchalantly. “And isn't it sort of our jobs to do once in a while? I mean, nobody is perfect. Our parents know we're going to do stuff that they don't approve of at least once in our lifetimes. I think they react depends on what your relationship is with them. My dad is exactly going to be high-fiving me if he ever finds out about Rachel, but he's going to tell me to be careful, just like you and a few of the guys because he loves me.”

Does that mean he isn't in it for the long haul with her? “You don't even ever telling them about Rachel? Not even in the future?”

Out of our friend group, I was one of the few who always looked to the future. When we were all freshmen, I'd talked about life after graduation with Raine when everybody else was focusing on whatever party was coming up. Matt told me once I was going to scare her off by talking about marriage and babies, and the future so much, but I told him he was wrong.

I guess he wasn't.

Matt grabs his pen and twists it, staring at his notes. “I don't know, but I don't want to hide Rachel forever, but it's not really up to me.”

“For what it's worth, I hope you don't have to hide her,” I tell him. “Nobody should have to hold any part of them back to save face.”

He nods. “Thanks, man.”

I feel my knee bounce under the table. “I've always tried doing what I knew was right my whole life. I've been training to take over Hardware, I've studied my ass off to get good grades, and I'm doing the fucking best to make sure Mom is as okay as she can be while Dad is in hospital. I spend more time at my parents' house than at my apartment because I don't want her to be alone. I've never been worried about disappointing my parents because I could handle whatever was tossed my way. But I haven't been able to say the same for a while and chalked it up to being weak.”

“The last thing anybody would call you is weak, Caleb.”

Why doesn't it feel that way then?

“Whether you want to believe it or not, there are people on your

people, matter what you're going through. If I were in your shoes, I'd prob-  
bawling my eyes out or drinking myself to death. There'd be no in-b-  
ing. He'd say you're doing a lot better than most people would. So don't thi  
feeling twisted up about life makes you any less of a man. It doesn't. I  
fuck up your dad would say the same thing."

going to He would. "I just hate how much everything has changed. My l  
nk how going exactly how I wanted it to, and it did a one-eighty overnight i  
ad isn't way possible. Ever since Raine and I broke up, I haven't felt settled. '  
out he's something she isn't telling me, Matt. I know it. The reason she gave  
s have, ending things doesn't make sense. I thought if I moved on or if I ju  
something with somebody else..."

n't plan Well, that was obviously a shitty plan because it only dragged sor  
innocent into my bullshit.

l to the Shaking my head, I swipe a hand down my tired face. "I hurt sor  
on with who didn't deserve it by trying to get over the girl who did the same  
ing up, and I know my parents don't approve, which sucks. They've always b  
arriage, my side with every choice I've made. But they want me to be a  
process things, and I..." I make a face. "I don't know how to be."

It's never just been me. I've always had a strong support system  
know. If family, friends, and girlfriend. Why would I need to learn how to be  
own when I had everything I could ever want?

ll him. Matt watches me for a moment before nodding once. "You've alw  
a great relationship with your parents, and you guys have gone throug  
together. There's nothing you're going to do that makes them love y  
what lless, even if they don't approve of what you're doing with this g  
Andersttelling you, dude, you're beating yourself up way too much abo  
ing my Everything will work out how it's supposed to if you give it time. Bu  
s at the need to talk to Raine to get things off your chest, do that. Follow yo  
artment Nobody but you knows what that's telling you to do."

l about He's got a point. If I just knew whatever she was holding back, ma  
sed my feel better. I could let go. Maybe it could be that easy. Closure. Who  
it up to want that? It'd give me a chance to focus on the other things in my l  
*should* take precedence.

"Now," he says, "enough of this fluffy shit. It's not my thing. If yo  
a softy, find DJ. That man is a fucking marshmallow."

side no Snorting out an amused laugh despite feeling anything but goc

ably below, I shake my head and try getting back into my homework.  
etween. “Thanks for the advice,” I tell him. “Hey, maybe we could get th  
ink you together sometime soon to do something. Watch one of the up  
’m sure games.”

Matt snorts. “As long as it’s not a Penn game, I’m sure DJ wo  
ife was down for that. Let us know your schedule.”

n every Blowing out a breath, I nod and think about how my schedule is g  
There’s change a lot, sooner rather than later.

me for Because of Dad.

ist tried Because of Raine.

*Raine.*

nebody Closing my textbook, I shove it into my bag and push the chai  
knowing I won’t be getting anything done if I can’t stop thinking abo  
nebody “I’ve got to go talk to someone. I’ll see you later, man.”

to me, He looks up in surprise, but those lips curl up at the corners as  
been on know exactly who I’m ditching him to talk to. “Good luck.”

lone to



l. Great

on my WHEN I WAS sixteen, I nearly pissed myself when I showed up at  
house with a bag full of all her favorite candy and a card with a  
ays had message inside asking her to the winter formal. I had to face her father  
gh a lot answered the door, and I knew his stance on dating. *Both* her paren  
ou any against her seeing anybody, which made it twice as hard getting t  
irl. I’m agree to me taking her anywhere. While we were already seeing each  
ut this. secret, I wanted to officially ask her to be my date for the dance th  
t if you second best to prom.

our gut. I was a little uncertain about asking her because she was acting  
after she got back from Virginia, but she told me she was fine a  
ybe I’d nothing was wrong. When she started acting like herself again, o  
doesn’t similar version anyway, I figured it couldn’t hurt to shoot my shot. If  
life that win her parents over, I could win her over too.

ou want That similar feeling of panic is back as I watch Raine behind the  
at Bea’s through the front window. I’ve been debating on going in  
past fifteen minutes but find myself backing away from the door every  
d right

reach for the handle. At least eight people have passed through the door  
the guys held open.

coming “What are you doing?” a familiar voice asks behind me before  
pops up by my side with a smile on her face. I look around to see  
could be boyfriend is with her, but it’s just us.

“I’m just...enjoying the fresh air,” I lie, knowing damn well she  
going to hit my bullshit.

Her eyes roll. “Is that why you’ve been pacing as you stare at your  
girlfriend like a creep? Because a lot of people would get arrested for that  
kind of behavior.”

I eye her, not as amused as she is when I see the giant grin plastered  
on her face. “Are you going to call the cops?”

She hums in contemplation. “Nah, it’s too amusing to watch you  
be nervous like this. What exactly *are* you doing?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I glance at the window. Raine is  
anywhere in sight, making me blow out a breath. I turn back to the girl  
curious eyes who’s waiting for my answer. “I need to talk to Raine.”

Skylar slowly nods, but there’s obvious skepticism on her face.  
wondering if she was all depressed because of you,” she murmurs, turning  
to look for the redhead inside.

Raine’s  
cheesy *Raine’s been depressed?*

She doesn’t give me a chance to ask for more info about that  
statement. “So, what? You suddenly can’t talk? You open your mouth and  
words come out. It’s basically magic.”

Wiseass. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Do you mean on the public street or at the town’s best bakery? I  
I’m here for coffee and doughnuts so I can hate myself later for eating  
after bitching to DJ about how I’ve gained ten pounds since moving here.”

I don’t bother giving her a cursory glance out of solidarity. There’s  
nothing wrong with her body, regardless of what food she uses to fuel it.  
I could be sure DJ told you not to worry about shit like that. That boy is love  
doubt a doughnut will do any harm.”

“What about pie? I can buy us a couple of slices and we can catch up  
counter want the details on whatever is going on with you and Raine. She  
for the haven’t gotten a chance to hang out recently.” I’m about to answer her  
y time I she points at the window. “Look! Raine sees us. Wave at the cute

...or I've Caleb."

She grabs my hand and starts waving it for me, drawing my attention to Skylar Raine. She stares between me and Skylar with a distant look on her face before turning to help someone at one of the tables.

"Come on," Skylar says, tugging me toward the front door.  
I know "Sky—"

She stops, turning to me and giving me a don't-mess-with-me stare. "Our ex-never taken you for a coward. Man up and go talk to your...er, well, what sort of coward are you? Go talk to Raine."

"Great pep talk. Really."  
She pats my shoulder and gives me her back as she opens the door. I know if I don't follow her, she'll probably pull me in, which I'd rather not do in front of all these people.

A few of the town boys are in the back, calling out to me with friendly waves and raised coffees in greeting. Following my best friend's girl friend over to the counter after waving back to them, I stuff my hands in the pockets of my jeans and wait for Raine to turn around.

"I was... Chest tightening, I think back to the breathing exercises I had to do during my first year in high school when I was worried about passing out in front of the front door. The same girl standing mere feet away from me.

Elena shoves Raine forward when she sees us waiting, earning the casual teenager a dirty look that she simply grins at. When the redhead turns away, my eyes go down to her hand, which isn't wrapped like it was the last time I saw her.

She lifts her hand, bending her fingers and wincing slightly because of her sensitive skin. "It was hard to work with all that gauze, so..." Her eyes meet Skylar's, and she smiles briefly before turning back to me. "Do you have any orders?"

There's... Her eyes refuse to meet mine, and her evasion of the elephant in the room is obvious. "I'm... doesn't sit right with me. Ironic, I guess, since I avoided her after the breakup, so I hook up. Payback's a bitch."

Skylar elbows my rib cage with a little more force than necessary. "I do, but first Caleb wants to talk to you about something."

I and I... *Jesus.*

...when... Raine's eyes lift to mine with a brief flicker of panic. Her eyes meet Skylar's, and she smiles nervously before nodding once, wiping her hands.



der into Jenner. I guess she and DJ have been binge-watching *The Hills*.”

“Want My lips twitch. “I like it. It’s very...you.”

It’s a foreign statement considering there have been moments o ar, whopast few months that make me wonder how well I really know her.

all she “What are you doing here, Caleb? Didn’t we say what we needed t hospital?” Her question isn’t unwarranted, and it’s filled with caution.

But I’m not letting her get out of this. “I’d say there’s a lot left r,’ andbetween us.”

She closes her eyes for a second before shaking her head. She lk you,hears the shortness in her tone too. “We’ve both made poor de especially when it comes to each other. I’m trying to figure things out.

ig back Have we though? “And where do I fit in with that? It’s not just you l who’s responsible for the choices we’ve made.”

ex. She gives me a look before her eyes go elsewhere. “I don’t kno a sigh,you think you’d fit anywhere at this point. If you’re here because y ena canbad, then you don’t need to. What’s done is done.”

I lean forward. “I don’t buy that. You just want me to drop it, but l sits ina reason why we keep coming back to each other.”

ie other “It’s because of our history. Please don’t read into it.”

e. *Too late.* “It’s true that I feel bad,” I admit. “It was wrong for involve myself with Emma and you at the same time. You two didn’t i in casethat.”

rved on When she nods, I know she must agree even though she doesn’t sa

“Let me make it up to you,” I offer. “I bought those fish sticks y little Iso much. Come over to my apartment tonight so we can talk.”

Raine crosses her arms on the edge of the table. “You got my favori Instead,sticks?”

s. They I nod.

“But you hate them.”

because “Well, *you* don’t,” I counter easily.

We stare at each other in silence.

hat did I’m the one who decides to break it when I notice Elena passing the drinks and a bag of our pastries. “I’ll help you with your project, ment orhoping schoolwork could be common ground for us. We always lead settogether in the past. It could be a good way to spend time together now

r Brody “I already found someone to help me,” she replies. “Leon Applebe



After racking my brain for the familiar name, it clicks. “Applebee neighbor?”

She nods absently, looking at something behind me. “I appreciate the offer, but I think you and I have more than enough on our plates. We don’t need to add business to ple—”

*Pleasure.*

A faint shade of pink coats her cheeks. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Of course not,” I murmur, brushing off the sting of rejection that clearly settles into my chest cavity. “Why him, anyway? The man is a close friend of mine. I didn’t even know he spoke to you before.”

” All she asks is “Why not him?”

*Why not him?* The question is innocent, but it strikes me the wrong way.

Because I used to think that’s how she thought of me whenever her name came up. Why would she ask her why we were together. “Why not Caleb?” she’d asked me once. “You feel the same way?”

“I would have helped you if you’d asked me to,” I tell her.

She huffs out a quiet laugh. “Would you have? Because I’ve tried to help you without much luck before. We’ve gotten good at fighting but not at helping each other.”

“I’d say there’s one other thing we’ve gotten good at,” I press not to dwell on the times we’ve spent alone. The color of her cheeks says she’s thinking the same thing. “A lot has changed for us, trust being the reason I couldn’t answer your texts or figure out what to say when I saw you. You’ve talked instead of pointed fingers. But one thing hasn’t changed. I’ll do anything for you, Raine. If you really needed me.”

rite fish

Skylar

” I say,

studied

l.

e.”

After racking my brain for the familiar name, it clicks. “Applebee? Your neighbor?”

She nods absently, looking at something behind me. “I appreciate the offer, but I think you and I have more than enough on our plates. We don’t need to add business to ple—”

*Pleasure.*

A faint shade of pink coats her cheeks. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Of course not,” I murmur, brushing off the sting of rejection that has no right settling into my chest cavity. “Why him, anyway? The man is a hermit. I didn’t even know he spoke to you before.”

All she asks is “Why not him?”

*Why not him?* The question is innocent, but it strikes me the wrong way. Because I used to think that’s how she thought of me whenever her parents would ask her why we were together. “Why not Caleb?” she’d asked her mom.

“I would have helped you if you’d asked me to,” I tell her.

She huffs out a quiet laugh. “Would you have? Because I’ve tried talking to you without much luck before. We’ve gotten good at fighting but not much else.”

“I’d say there’s one other thing we’ve gotten good at,” I press not needing to point out the times we’ve spent alone. The color of her cheeks says she’s thinking the same thing. “A lot has changed for us, trust being the biggest reason I couldn’t answer your texts or figure out what to say when I should have talked instead of pointed fingers. But one thing hasn’t changed. I’d do anything for you, Raine. If you really needed me.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

# RAINE

*I'D DO ANYTHING for you, Raine.* Those words echoed in my head all day. The only thing that snapped me out of it was Mom asking me where I was a few hours after getting home from work.

"I'm going out," I tell her, taking my jacket off the hook by the door. "Need anything? I saw we were low on creamer, and I know how you feel when you don't have any for your morning coffee."

One of Mom's eyebrows pops up. "Why are you trying to distract me from telling me where you're going?"

I pause with my jacket halfway on. "I'm not trying to distract you. The last time you ran out of creamer, you went on a rampage for the rest of the day, and I wasn't sure any of us were going to make it."

She gives me *the look*. The unamused one that most mothers give their children a handful of times in their lives. "It was a limited-time pumpkin cheecake creamer that the store ran out of. I had reason to be upset."

Popping my lips, I offer a solemn nod. "I suppose. Anyway, I'm—"  
"You haven't gone out this late since you were dating. Is this about her?" she asks, this time giving me pause as I untuck my hair from the jacket.  
I know who she's asking about, but I play dumb anyway. "Who?"

Pushing off the table, Mom walks over to me before I can open my mouth. "I know it may seem tempting to go back to what's familiar to you, but you've got your whole life ahead of you. Plus, you've got a puppy who's only partially house-trained. What am I supposed to do with him? It's already that he's your responsibility, not mine."

Gripping the strap of my purse as I haul it over my shoulder, I turn to Mom, trying to keep calm. My mood has been everywhere lately, and patience hasn't come as easily, especially when it's about the topic of conversation. I went back and forth on meeting up with her tonight, and truth be told, I'm not sure why I am. I swore to myself

cut him out of my life cold turkey.

For him. All for him. What will it take for him to understand that?

*The truth*, that pesky voice mocks me. *The one you refuse to tell hi*

I'd rather he assume the worst of me, that I wanted to try seein people instead of settling with him, than let him know the real reason. want to admit that I saw Cody, that he got me pregnant, or that I suf miscarriage, and I don't want to relive all the moments after—the ay. The appointments, the bad news delivered by the specialists.

I want this choice to allow Caleb and me to grieve but to be gra going a the long run. Because maybe someday we can both be happy, howe e door. unfolds in our respective lives.

Shaking out of the thought, I say, "Sigmund is sleeping in his cra you get his stuffed duck that you bought him. I took him out already, and h ract me food and water, so he'll be fine until I'm back."

Mom lets out one of her heavy sighs. "I still can't believe you nar ou. But after that weird man with the mommy issues. He's too cute for th e entire almost cruel."

I roll my eyes at her theatrics. She was against having a puppy give a until she saw Sigmund's face. She fell in love the second his tongue eecake out to give her a sloppy kiss. "He's one of the most famous psycholo the world, Mom. Even if a lot of his psychoanalysis theories hav ,, discredited, his studies have done a lot for modern-day therapy. We w t him?" be where we are if not for his work."

"His *outdated* work," Mom all but grumbles. "Where are you t. anyway?"

"Like I said. Out."

"You're avoiding the question, which means it does have to c ie door. ou, but Caleb. You're not together again, are you? I thought you moved on fro r who's You wanted to focus on finishing your degree, finding a practice that old you set you up with good benefits and a financial future. I thought there m n to my been someone, but I was hoping it was something fun for you. Not sei ; along sneaky."

Ew. Mom thinks I've been sneaking out to hook up with se Caleb is random? I mean, I guess she's not entirely wrong, not that I'd conside ith him random. But there's too much history between us, so even thinkin that I'd moving on is hard to swallow.

My mind goes to Emma and Caleb, making my stomach dip, but I don't let that hurt sink in when it has no right to. He did what I wanted to do. He tried finding somebody else who could give him what I could not. He can't focus on that right now, or I'll chicken out of going tonight and then I don't get trapped in my room feeling regret. I feel too much of that lately.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but—"

Mom gives me *the look* again. "I'm thinking that you're running away from the only boy you know. You made your choice already. It's not so difficult in you should go back on, especially so soon. There are plenty of fish in the sea. Isn't that how the saying goes?"

Irritation bubbles under my skin. "I'm not *running* to anybody with anybody. He and I are going to talk and clear the air. And you know who's got the choice? Why does it have to be cemented?"

"Raine..."

"What?" I cry, voice rising. "What is your problem with Caleb? He's never done anything wrong. He doesn't have a criminal record. He doesn't even speed, for crying out loud. Out of all the people I could wind up with, he's one of the good ones. Shouldn't mothers want that for their daughter? Shouldn't you want someone secure instead of someone like Dad?"

Her expression darkens. "Watch yourself, young lady. I don't like you've been raising your voice at me or bringing my relationship with your father into my situation. What's gotten into you lately? You've been acting strange for weeks now, and I don't like who you're becoming."

Fists tightening, I reach around her for the door handle. "It's late at night that you think your relationship with Dad has nothing to do with my life, considering your example of love is all I've ever known my whole life. I let that sink in a little further, lips parting with the realization that I'm not sure I fully thought about until now.

All Mom does is stare at the truth being thrown at her the way it doesn't have to be. Sure, I've never been in an abusive relationship with my father. They've never hit me or threatened to and never really yelled at me. I know that doesn't mean the emotional toll doesn't swing just as hard as a fist would.

Swallowing down the thick emotion, I ask, "And how would you expect Caleb to know how I've been acting when you're always sneaking around with me, going about doing God knows what instead of being here?"

Her hands go to her hips. "I'm a grown woman who can do as I please."

I refuse without my daughter's permission."

him to "Well, I'm an adult too, last I checked." She starts to say something I shouldn't. I cut her off before I can stop myself. "You know what, I don't want to hear I'll with this right now. We're not going to get anywhere by arguing about right and who's wrong."

"That's good, because you wouldn't like the answer," she informs me back to I stare at her. "One of these days, you're going to tell me why you're so bitter about love. You never liked it. I used to think it was because of the sea. I wasn't in it with Dad, but then you acted the same way with Caleb and I get that your life isn't where you used to think it would be, but I'd say you're doing or had a pretty good one so far regardless. You've got people who care about what you do. Tiffany. Me. Even Dad."

Mom blinks slowly. Whether she accepts it or not is an entirely different issue. "I've never claimed to have a bad life, Raine, or a grudge against anyone." He's I open the door and shoot back, "Well you could have fooled me." She doesn't Neither of us says goodbye before I walk out, closing the door behind me and glancing over at Leon's house to see if he's outside. I bet he's watching me. *Wheel of Fortune* right now because there's a light on inside where I think the living room is.

like you It doesn't take long to drive to Caleb's, which is good because I'm not into this making weird noises *again* that definitely don't sound healthy. I've been praying it lasts me a few more months, but it may be on its last legs at this point.

ughable Pulling up to the curb in front of the building that sat abandoned for years, I glance around to see the darkened house and empty driveway.

." Ever since I heard Caleb was living here, I've found myself driving by on my way home. I'm not sure why it eased some of the tension in my chest when I'd see his truck there, but it did. What had I expected to find? Someone else's vehicle? Another girl? I'm not sure what I would have done if I had. Seeing Emma touch his arm at the hospital was bad enough. But that doubt I would have been reasonable if I saw her or anybody else leaving the apartment.

ou even *Dumb girl*, I chastise myself.

ith Dad Walking up the two uneven cement steps to his front door, I knock on the step back, glancing at the window to see if there's a light on I missed.

please Nothing.

Then I knock again. "Caleb?"

I glance at my smartwatch to check the time, but I expected him to deal around. He always was when he said he'd be. There were only two times that I remember who's all the years I've known Caleb when he was either late or had to bail on me. Once when he got a flat on the side of the road and was stranded with no phone service, and the other when he slept through his alarm after pulling an all-nighter the day before during midterms. I wasn't mad at him either of those times, and I don't want to be now.

But there's a nagging feeling on top of the leftover irritation that you've boiling from the brief confrontation with my mother that certainly doesn't help me feel any less on edge.

After a few minutes of standing there, I bend down to peek in a different window and confirm that there's nobody home. As I'm walking to my car, I hear a door crack open behind me. Just as I'm starting to let in relief, I wasn't bailed on, I turn to see an unfamiliar face at the door on the other end of the building.

"Are you looking for Caleb?" the older man asks.

Readjusting my bag, I nod and try not to let my chest deflate with disappointment. "Do you know where he is? We were supposed to meet at my car in seven, but his truck isn't here, and nobody is answering the door."

Caleb's neighbor shakes his head. "He's not here, I'm afraid. He's been out at this while ago. I'd try giving him a call. I'm sure he just lost track of time and will be back soon."

Swallowing the swell of emotion rising up my throat, I force a weak, unconvincing "Yeah. Maybe." I'm about to get into my car when I remember my manners. "Thank you for letting me know."

The man waves me off before going back into his apartment, leaving me directed to my thoughts as I slam the car door behind me.

*He forgot.*

That doesn't sit well with me and definitely doesn't lessen the ache that's already burrowed deep in my stomach.

Pulling out my phone, I hit the Call button and raise the cell to my ear. After waiting for the ringing to stop, it goes to voicemail. I close my eyes and say, "I'm at your apartment, but you aren't. Which is obvious, I guess. Nothing came up with your dad. Just...I don't know. Text me or something. I at least know you're alive."

The last thing I want is for something to have happened to Mr. ...  
n to beBut there's another part of me, an anxious part that has really  
imes inannoying me, that wants some sort of answer. One I could justify.  
ick out: Because being forgotten...well, that's not something I can sett  
with noeasily, no matter if I've told myself it's better he moves on without  
lling analways love Caleb, always want him.  
ither of That acceptance is my purgatory.

's been  
doesn't



I DRIVE AROUND aimlessly for forty-five minutes, only stopping once to  
nto the favorite fast food and another time when the sound coming from the b  
y car, I of my car scared me enough to pull over and make sure my whe  
f that I secure. I'm halfway through my chicken nuggets and ten minutes fr  
ier side parents' house when Caleb's name pops up on my cell phone screen.  
hour and a half *after* we were supposed to meet.

I'm tempted not to answer out of pettiness, but I know better than  
e from something happened that he couldn't control, I'd only be adding fue  
meet at fire between us by assuming otherwise. It's why I pick up.

"I'm sorry" is the first thing he says when I swipe to accept the cal  
e left a I take a deep breath and slow down at the stoplight, biting into  
me and nugget. "Is your dad okay?" I ask with my mouth halfway full. I'm l  
which isn't uncommon when I'm overwhelmed. I've always b  
out an emotional eater.

number A pause. "Yes. He's okay."

ring me "Your mom?"

"Yes, but—"

"Was it an emergency?"

His voice is quiet when he says, "Raine. I'm sorry."

e anger I stare down at my food, feeling my appetite slowly fade. "It wa  
emergency then. You bailed."

my ear. The statement is met with more silence on his end, save som  
yes and background noise. I grip the steering wheel a little tighter than I need  
. I hope hit the gas once the light turns green. The radio has been off, leav  
hing so solely to my thoughts the entire time I've been out.



Anders. I think about my parents. Their poor communication. How often I started fighting. How long it took them to accept that separating was for the best. I saw it unfold any differently, would I be different? Maybe I'd trust myself more—be open to telling Caleb that my love for him has never gone away from me. I'll Instead, I saw what it's like for two people to keep each other at arm's length just to avoid talking about the hard stuff.

*"It's not that simple, Raine. You'll understand when you're older," she says, patting my back and shooing me to another room when I ask her how Mom and Dad made up yet.*

At what age will I get it though? Nothing about life is easy, I've learned that much. But the older I get, the less I understand. Like why I want to go on to the same man who I know I need to push away for good.

Eventually, I pull myself back to the conversation at hand, feeling the exhaustion of our push and pull weigh me down. "I know you've got your own life going on in your life already, but meeting tonight was your idea. Talking to me about your idea. Offering to help me on my project, which is a huge part of my grade by the way, was *your* idea, even if I don't need the help."

Which I do.

He doesn't need to know that though.

"I got distracted at the hospital," he explains. "I know it's a pretty lame excuse, but it's the truth. I'm trying to spend as much time with you as possible and try not to look at my phone while I'm there. He's not... not a lot of time left. If you were in my shoes, you'd do the same thing regardless of your relationship with your family."

My nose twitches at his tone, which isn't exactly gentle or apologetic. I know our families are exact opposites, but our love for them is the same. If I were in your shoes, I would have *let you know* that our plans changed. I wouldn't have made them at all if I had other priorities, which I know my father needs to be right now. It takes five seconds to send a text message to Caleb. I wouldn't have cared if you had just told me you couldn't meet with me.

Okay, maybe I would have cared *a little*.

I hear a quiet sigh from him. "You're right. I'm—"

"Don't say 'sorry' again," I tell him, not wanting to hear it. "I know you're right. All the two of us are anymore is *sorry*."

I don't recognize the sound of my own voice as I squeeze my eyes shut. "My dad is *dying*, Raine. Isn't that reason enough to be a little more open to talking about the hard stuff?"

en they minded? He's family. When Mom called me after I got done with  
est. If I thought..." His voice cracks. "I thought the worst. So yeah, I wasn't  
my gut thinking about you or anyone else because all I could focus on was  
way. I was walking into or what would happen once I got there. Then the  
t arm's conversation started up again, which put everybody in a shitty mood.  
top of that, Dad got on my ass about you and Emma, and Mom isn't  
" Mom about me putting him on edge with my personal-life drama."

r if she "Your dad knows about us?" I whisper.

"Is that really all you got from that?" he asks skeptically.

learned I slow down at another stop sign, frowning when the noise in  
to hold starts up again. "Your dad has always been nice to me. I don't wa  
parents to judge me or think less of me."

ing the Caleb doesn't say anything right away, but I hear something mu  
ot a lot under his breath that I can't understand. "Trust me. They're not judgi  
ing was about anything. It's me they're not very happy with."

of my I doubt that. When it comes to us, it's a two-way street. Parents  
aren't going to be fans of the people who hurt him. "They love you."

Just like my parents love me, even if they don't say it often. I know  
just wish I'd hear it more. See it. Feel it.

ss-poor As I start driving again, I notice thick smoke start to rise from the  
Dad as the car that blocks my view. "What the hell?"

.there's "What?" I hear from the other end of the phone.

e thing, I quickly pull over to the side of the road and get out, spilling my  
nuggets all over the street.

etic. He "Raine, what's going on? Talk to me."

me. "If "M-my car is smoking."

ed. Or I "Christ. Where are you?" There are muffled noises like he's sl  
w yoursomething in his hands. "I'm leaving the hospital now anyway. I ca  
essage, take a look."

t up." I tell him what street I'm on and the nearest number I see on one  
houses. "I don't know what to do. Should I call the fire department?"

"It sounds like it's overheated. Do you see a fire anywhere?" I hear  
ow you close on his end. "I'll be there in a few minutes. If there's no fire, do

This used to happen to Mom's old Hyundai. Remember? The puke-gr  
closed. that she put neon-orange seat coverings in. My dad taught me how  
absent-that."

work, I Sniffing back anxious tears, I grab my bag out of the car just i  
t really “Your mom loved that car,” I say weakly.

what I He chuckles. “Yeah, but she also loves the brand-new one she go  
hospice This one has heated seats *and* a heated steering wheel. She’s fine.”

And on “I guess,” I murmur.

t happy “Did you know my dad used to want a Bentley? Not a new one bu  
the classics—a 1938 in black. He said when they’re polished, the  
slicker.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Mom still says they’re the  
cars she’s ever seen.”

my car I know he’s trying to get me to calm down, and it’s working. I  
nt your “What would he have done with a car that old?”

“Show it,” Caleb answers. “At least that’s what he said. We bot  
rmured Dad barely took time off work, so it wasn’t likely that it would have  
ing you very far. But they put classic cars in the town parades sometimes, esp  
during the Fourth. Remember when we were nominated prom prin  
like his princess and got to sit in the back of that classic convertible throwing  
to the kids?”

v that. I I do remember that. Nobody was surprised we’d won the crown  
during junior year or when we won king and queen during senior yea  
hood of back in high school, we were the couple to beat.

“I remember,” I whisper.

My anxiety is still spiked, even when I see headlights in the distan  
chicken know exactly who it is pulling up to where my poor car is dying on t  
of the empty street.

Caleb climbs out and instantly walks over to the hood of the car.  
I’m avoiding like it’ll blow up at any second.

uffling “You can hang up the phone now,” he tells me, which I hear twice  
n come he’s only a few feet away.

It only takes him a few minutes of tinkering under the hood,  
e of the something inside the car, and going back to the front before he wi  
hands off on his shirt, closes the hood, and walks over to me.

r a door “Overheated,” he explains. “Your radiator needs to be replaced  
n’t call, going to burn out the engine. I think there’s a leak in one of the hoses t  
een one *Great.*

v to fix “Hey,” he says softly, reaching out and brushing my arm. “It’s  
think we should leave it where it is to cool off and we can grab it

in case morning. It's not blocking anybody's driveway, and vehicles can  
easily. We'll leave a note on the windshield if you want."

ot after. I don't know why, but the gentle tone of his voice breaks the barr  
been keeping my emotions behind, and the floodgates open.

He still cares about me even when I put him through hell. That  
t one of than I ever saw from my parents.

ey look Once the first tear falls, all the others follow suit until I'm bawling  
ugliest middle of the sidewalk. Not even a pretty cry. An ugly, snotty kind t  
my nose running and my voice hoarse and my body shaking.

A little. And it feels *good*.

Caleb instantly steps closer, then wraps his arms around me in a tig  
h know "Why are you crying, baby girl? I can help with the car. My dad  
made it people who can get you a great deal."

pecially First a puppy, now car parts?

ice and It only makes me cry harder.

g candy He squeezes me into him, resting his chin on the top of my he  
brushing his fingers through my hair. "Talk to me, Raine. Please?  
ns. Not seeing you cry. You know that. I know I screwed up tonight, but I  
r. Even mean any harm by it. I swear."

The more I try catching my breath, the more I end up hiccupping  
his chest as a tissue to dry off my face, which he doesn't seem to  
nce and before pulling back and running the backs of my hands against my che

he side Once I'm able to collect myself enough to speak coherently, I sa  
my chicken n-nuggets fell on the ground, and I r-really wanted them."

, which He stares at me.

Blinks.

re since And then starts laughing.

"All right," he tells me, hooking an arm around my shoulder with  
, doing chuckle. "Forget about the fish sticks. We'll go get you some more  
pes his and find somewhere to talk."

I sniff back more tears, doing my best to dry my face and fight  
or it's surge to cry again. "I am not sleeping with you again."

oo." He opens the passenger side door of his truck for me. "I didn't a  
to."

okay. I "Just chicken nuggets."

t in the "With the sweet barbecue sauce if they're out of the tangy ran

get by confirms with a half grin tilting one side of his mouth as he watches me  
in. Before he closes the door, he stares at me for a second like he wants  
ier I've something. His eyes go back to my car, then to me. Even though I'm sure  
not what he was going to tell me, he grips the door and says, "Let's  
's more you some chicken."

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ch," he

confirms with a half grin tilting one side of his mouth as he watches me climb in. Before he closes the door, he stares at me for a second like he wants to say something. His eyes go back to my car, then to me. Even though I'm sure it's not what he was going to tell me, he grips the door and says, "Let's go get you some chicken."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# CALEB

THERE'S A THICKNESS in the air between us as Raine and I sit in the car truck and eat the food I bought us in the drive-through. Our view from the parking lot is nothing like at Alden Field, but I know she's more comfortable here, surrounded by other people getting a late dinner.

"You're moving your hand a little better," I note, looking at the ice cream question. "How's it feeling?"

She lifts it, moving her fingers without flinching. "I took some earlier. It stings a little sometimes, but it's fine otherwise."

I nod, staring at the burger on my lap.

Raine picks up a chicken nugget and offers it to me. "They put sweet chili sauce in here." She digs out the sauce container and passes it over to me, arching her brows when I don't accept either.

"You eat them," I tell her.

Her lips twitch. "You love this sauce."

*I love you more* is my first thought. I don't bother speaking that thought, because it wouldn't get me very far. "You're the one who loves them. Go ahead and eat up. You look like you've lost weight."

She looks good, but it doesn't stop me from being hyperaware that my face looks a little narrower than normal.

We go back to eating in silence, save for the food wrapper crinkling under my double cheeseburger whenever I pick it up and set it down.

There's something to be said about people who can sit comfortably in silence. Mom used to tell me that's how you know somebody is the one you don't have to do anything to feel comfortable around them. You simply exist in the same atmosphere.

"What do you see for your future?" I ask, looking over and watching her stop midway through taking a sip of her fountain drink.

She slowly lowers her drink. "Caleb..."

“Excluding me,” I reiterate. She’s not going to tell me the reason she called it off without a little pushing. “Who is Raine five years from now? What was your plan when you ended it with us? You had to have one. You always do.”

My ex blinks at my boldness, then whispers, “I don’t know.” He leans back against the headrest. “I’m not sure who I’ll even be tomorrow at this point. That’s a lot to ask of somebody.”

Another cop-out. Unlike her, I know my answer. “I see myself running a successful hardware store, one Dad would be proud of. I’ve already making plans to build a website that will help people be able to find things easier. They can pick it up once it’s in. There’s going to be competitive prices against the chain stores that they’d have to travel to makes Anders that much more accessible to the community.” Ignoring food, I keep going. “I want to buy that plot of land near my parents and build something on it. Nothing big or showy, just a small house with plenty of land to settle on. Create a garden, like the one Mom has out there and maybe do an in-ground pool like Dad used to consider putting in that space to call my own, with people to call my own. A home. Happiness. That’s what I want for my future.”

I see her visibly swallow, as if that’s somehow too much for her to handle.

“But,” I add, leaning back and picking at the fries barely touched by me, “I would have settled for anything that would include you in it, that meant you focusing on your career first and us later. If that were the reason you ended our relationship, I would have understood. You didn’t have to lie. You didn’t have to make it seem like there was someone else you wanted to explore first.”

A tiny breath escapes her, and I’m not sure she’ll answer me.

Setting her drink down in the cupholder between us, she shifts her gaze to me. “How many people have you been with besides me?”

The question is straight out of left field. “Where did that come from?” “Just...” She wets her lips. “How many?”

*For fuck’s sake.* “I’m not sure I’m in the mood to discuss this, especially since you didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m trying to.”

Confusion has my brow furrowing.



son she Raine looks down at her lap. “Even in high school, you seemed w? Tenabout your life. What you would do and where you would end up. You ave hadlet anything get in the way of the image you built in your head. A always, always included me.” She takes a deep breath and lifts her headupward until her wary, dark eyes are meeting my own. “I never und row atthat. I knew what I wanted to go to school for and hoped I’d find practice to work at before opening my own. But anything coul nning ahappened. And there were some things that definitely made me wc startedthat’d happen. External factors.”

id order *External factors.* “I’m not following.”

to be “You had football scholarships and girls always after you who , whichhave given you the world no matter what it was, and I never understo ing myyou didn’t go after that life,” she admits, fiddling with the last nugge ’ housebox. “I’m not like any of them. I used to think that was my parents se withinto my head about why it wasn’t smart to settle down or be in a it back,relationship so young, but that’s not it at all.”

g in. A I know her parents used to get in her head, but she never seemed l opiness.bought into anything they said. It didn’t stop her from dating me or st around. That was how I knew she loved me. Because even though sh her tothem too, she was willing to risk their consequences.

That meant something.

etween “Your parents fought all the time because they tried making sor even ifwork between them that wasn’t going to. They weren’t happy i the realrelationship.” I lock eyes with her, vulnerability seeping through m i’t have“But we were. Weren’t we?”

or other Pain instantly lances through her facial features, her glass saddening as she fidgets with the seat buckle next to her. “Caleb, it wa because I was miserable with you. I thought you knew that by now.”

er body “Then *why?*” I keep asking myself that question, but I’ve never i balls to question her answer until now. What’s the worst that could hap n?” pressing her if I already lost her once? “You haven’t actually explore options, and I know the truth has to be more than just being sc ociallyrepeating your parents’ mistakes. You’re smarter than that.”

She fidgets in her seat. “It isn’t about being smarter. Kids are impa a million different ways by their parents. You’ve always been lucky v ones you have. Your mom and dad are amazing people who have nev

so sure afraid to show their love for you or each other. That's never been my u never It's complicated."

nd that     Something bubbles up under my skin that itches to come out. "Yo er gazewhat's complicated? My father living most of his life being physically erstoodnever smoking, barely drinking, and eating fairly healthy ninety per a goodthe time and *still* winding up with a type of cancer that can't be cured. d havethat's far from me being lucky, Raine. Complicated is trying to und nder ifthe unknown when we'll never really understand it. *This*"—my fing between us—"is not complicated. *We* are not complicated."

"I—"

would     "Turning down my proposal was one thing. We could have od why something out that didn't require you actually breaking up wi t in her *Complicated* is trying to figure out how we ended up here after seve gettingtogether. Almost a decade, Raine. I wanted to marry you. We'd talke serious that life together like you were actually going to be in it."

When her jaw starts quivering, I know I'm pushing it. "That life like sheso far away, Caleb. I knew you were up to something at graduatio eakingjust... I couldn't."

e loved     Swallowing, I lower my hands and tuck them into the pockets jeans. "I've been going through everything trying to figure out what t happened to us. I thought I missed a sign. Maybe there was someth nethingthat I was ignoring. But we were *happy*. So why? Why give it all up n theirshit has been gnawing on me for months now even though I've been ti y skin, push past it. To move on like I thought you wanted to do. But when y you hadn't been with anybody, I was second-guessing the reason yo y eyesme even more. I still want to be in your life. I want to be your friend is neverpartner. Your teammate. Hell, I want to be more. But I'm struggling to out if that's going to get me even more hurt unless I know the truth."

had the     There were too many nights before things with Dad got really bad open byspent hours replaying every damn memory we shared, wondering wh d otherwrong. I couldn't pinpoint anything that gave me relief. No closu ared of answers. At my worst, I broke down in front of my mother and asked saw anything that I didn't—suspected something I never did. Not ev acted in could give me anything to make the grief go away.

with the     All she did was wipe at my tears and tell me I needed to take thi er beenday at a time.

family. So I did.

I used my friends to deal.

you know I used Emma.

active, Then shit with Dad went downhill fast, and it distracted me from my failed relationship in the worst way possible. I'd rather be miserable than I'd say meant keeping Dad alive. What the hell does my happiness mean in comparison to his health?

her darts There's a moment of stretched silence before I realize Raine is giving me time to make sure I'm done before she finally speaks up. "I really am sorry about Caleb. So sorry about your dad, about...everything. There's nothing I can do to make up for what I did at graduation."

to me. "You could tell me the truth."

in years Her eyes close for a moment. "I told you the truth the day after you told me to marry you. I said I was scared and confused and worried that there was something more out there."

seemed "If that's the truth," I tell her, wrapping up what's left of my story and knowing I've got zero appetite for it, "then I'd hate to hear what your story sounds like."

of my Her eyes widen. I can feel her gaze follow me as I toss the left over and shove it back into the bag and stare out my window.

going off We don't talk for a long time, and neither of us makes a move or says a word? That It isn't until we get to the stop sign at the end of the school's driveway that I notice the shift in her body. Her fists are clenched together so hard that they're white. As soon as they release, she turns to me and says, "It wasn't always you. I lost my virginity to somebody else and lied with you. You decided to take that step together."

to figure Everything inside me shatters at her cool tone.

Hope and all.

where I *It hasn't always been you.*

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So I did.

I used my friends to deal.

I used Emma.

Then shit with Dad went downhill fast, and it distracted me from my failed relationship in the worst way possible. I'd rather be miserable if it meant keeping Dad alive. What the hell does my happiness mean in comparison to his health?

There's a moment of stretched silence before I realize Raine is giving me time to make sure I'm done before she finally speaks up. "I really am sorry, Caleb. So sorry about your dad, about...everything. There's nothing I can do to make up for what I did at graduation."

"You could tell me the truth."

Her eyes close for a moment. "I told you the truth the day after you asked me to marry you. I said I was scared and confused and worried that there was more out there."

"If that's the truth," I tell her, wrapping up what's left of my burger, knowing I've got zero appetite for it, "then I'd hate to hear what your bullshit sounds like."

Her eyes widen. I can feel her gaze follow me as I toss the leftover food back into the bag and stare out my window.

We don't talk for a long time, and neither of us makes a move or sound.

It isn't until we get to the stop sign at the end of the school's driveway that I notice the shift in her body. Her fists are clenched together so tightly they're white. As soon as they release, she turns to me and says, "It hasn't always been you. I lost my virginity to somebody else and lied when we decided to take that step together."

Everything inside me shatters at her cool tone.

Hope and all.

*It hasn't always been you.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# CALEB

THE NEXT DAY, I go through one of the drawers in my bedroom and pull out the velvet ring box I've stored since graduation.

Maybe a part of me, deep down, thought I'd get a second chance with Raine.

Because it's always been her.

I knew it from the beginning, even when everyone else said it would be off. "It's the honeymoon phase," they would tell me.

There was never a point when I believed it'd stop feeling like she was a different person. I could never explain to people the reason why. I just knew, and the feeling was one that's had a death grip on me for the better part of the years.

We had our tough moments like any couple, but nothing that ever broke us. Not in ways that I didn't think we could recover from. I can't help but wonder how true that is though.

Looking back, I see that the rose-colored glasses I wore were discoloring the flags I should have seen waving. Like the first time we'd had a fight, my mom convinced Dad to close the store and take a trip for their anniversary, leaving me at home alone for the weekend.

I'd asked Raine to stay the night, hoping she knew what the sixteen-year-old version of me was really asking for. It made sense for us to take that step together, to seal the love I knew we had for each other.

*"Do you want to?" I ask, breaking the kiss she'd initiated in my childhood bed.*

*She blinks up at me, a wariness to her eyes I can only assume is fear. When she doesn't say anything, I start to move away from her, but she backtracks. "We don't have to. We can wait."*

*I see her swallow and wonder what's going through her mind. She reaches out and touches my hand, not saying a word.*

*So I say, "I don't want to hurt you, but I want to share this with you  
never..." She doesn't need me to tell her that. We're equals here. She*

*Wetting her lips, she weaves our fingers together and squeezes our  
know you won't hurt me."*

She never said it was her first time.

Never said it wasn't.

She let me take her clothes off and kiss her and touch her like we  
pull out before. But when it came to the actual act, I'd felt how she locked up  
her breathing changed. I should have known it was more than nerves I  
ce with I knew her better than that.

I wanted to tell her I loved her that night, but I didn't. Something I  
back. Uncertainty. Maybe that was another sign hinting at our den  
ld wear along.

As much as I hate to accept it, I asked for the truth that she'  
was my holding back all this time, and she gave it to me.

What better closure is there than finding out the woman I've lo  
nd that years cheated on me? Lied? *It hasn't always been you.* Fuck me. I b  
last ten were signs I ignored long before she told me she'd admitted what her  
r broke were when I asked.

She didn't *wonder* if there were other people out there for her. Sh  
help but from experience.

With the ring in hand, I go to a local jeweler and set the box  
oloring counter. "How much to buy that from me?"

ex. My The man behind the glass counter display takes it and inspects  
iversary, inside, offering me a sad smile. "You probably won't get back w  
paid," he says honestly, plucking out the ring and studying it closer.

n-year- The truth is I don't care. "I just want it gone."

at next I don't think twice about the number he gives me. I simply accept  
on my the money, and walk out with what little is left of my dignity intact.

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*So I say, "I don't want to hurt you, but I want to share this with you. I've never..." She doesn't need me to tell her that. We're equals here. She gets it.*

*Wetting her lips, she weaves our fingers together and squeezes once. "I know you won't hurt me."*

She never said it was her first time.

Never said it wasn't.

She let me take her clothes off and kiss her and touch her like we'd done before. But when it came to the actual act, I'd felt how she locked up. How her breathing changed. I should have known it was more than nerves because I knew her better than that.

I wanted to tell her I loved her that night, but I didn't. Something held me back. Uncertainty. Maybe that was another sign hinting at our demise all along.

As much as I hate to accept it, I asked for the truth that she'd been holding back all this time, and she gave it to me.

What better closure is there than finding out the woman I've loved for years cheated on me? Lied? *It hasn't always been you.* Fuck me. I bet there were signs I ignored long before she told me she'd admitted what her worries were when I asked.

She didn't *wonder* if there were other people out there for her. She knew from experience.

With the ring in hand, I go to a local jeweler and set the box on the counter. "How much to buy that from me?"

The man behind the glass counter display takes it and inspects what's inside, offering me a sad smile. "You probably won't get back what you paid," he says honestly, plucking out the ring and studying it closer.

The truth is I don't care. "I just want it gone."

I don't think twice about the number he gives me. I simply accept it, take the money, and walk out with what little is left of my dignity intact.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# RAINE

FRESH SNOW CRUNCHES under my boots as I follow the little pawprints of me that zigzag in every direction whenever something catches Sig's eye.

"He's walking better on the leash," Mom says, raising the coffee lips. Things were tense for a while at home, especially because she c stick around more often after I called her out on it.

The first couple of days following our fight, we kept to ourselves the times we'd bump into each other whenever I'd bring Sigmund potty training and walks. Then one night, when I was watching my late-night talk show in the living room, she sat down beside me, p blanket over both of our laps, and said, "I just want you to be happy."

It wasn't an apology, but I knew it was as close as I'd get to one. S though I wasn't sure I entirely believed it, I accepted the olive branch, went about our lives. She never asked about that night with Caleb never gave her any information.

What was the point?

I told him what he wanted to hear.

Some truth.

Not *the* truth, but a part of it.

The part that would cut whatever tie he had with me so he fantasizing about our future. It kills me to know I'd snipped the in string still connecting us, but it had to be done. If he hates me, he can on to me or whatever version of us he's building up in his head.

It's safer this way.

And maybe someday I'll believe what I told him—that there's so else out there for me. Not anybody like him, who could make me ha way he did. But somebody close.

Hopefully.



The leash tugging me forward and nearly making me slip is what pulls me out of my head and back to reality. “Yeah, he’s training faster than expected.”

“Which is good because I don’t know how much more pee I’m going to have to clean up,” Mom remarks, eyeing the gray ball of energy that’s sniffing the sign and cocking his leg. “I thought I was done with that when you and I got you potty-trained.”

At least she hasn’t brought up the shoe the dog chewed up. I’m not sure when he had time to sneak into her room to get it, but by the time I realized what his sharp little teeth were biting into, it was too late to save her favorite pair of loafers, and I heard about it for days.

“So…” I pop my lips and bury my free hand in the pocket of my jeans. “What are we doing for Thanksgiving? I haven’t talked to Dad in a while about it because he’s busy closing on that big estate he was vying for.”

We’re days away, and I’ve been wondering what our plans are for the first Thanksgiving since they separated. I haven’t wanted to bring it up because it isn’t like we can avoid the topic forever.

“When isn’t that man busy?” is her first reply, sighing as she stares at her four-legged grandchild. She doesn’t admit to sneaking out and talking to him or give away anything about her late-night adventures. And maybe that’s better that I am in the dark. There’s only so much I want to know about my mother. “I don’t know, Raine. Neither one of us can cook, and we’ve had a big to-do for this holiday anyway.”

She wants to skip it? Disappointment settles into my stomach. “I think we could come up with something if we looked up some recipes online.”

It’s a weak suggestion, one I already know she’ll turn down, so I’m not surprised when she shakes her head. “Honey, let’s be honest. You and I can’t cook to save our lives, and starting to learn by making a turkey probably isn’t the best idea.”

“It’s never too late to learn new things. I still think we should sign up for a class together.”

The look on her face says it all. “Raine, where is that logical side of your brain? You can’t expect every old dog to learn new tricks. Habits are hard to break for a reason. It takes years to break them.”

Gripping the end of the leash tighter, I frown at the woman whose

pulls megoes off in her pocket. Why won't she even give this a shot? Besides than Isandwiches, there's not much else we can put together ourselves.

When she pulls it out, she stares at whatever name is on the screen. "I need to take this. I'll meet you back at the house. Watch you go a road. Not all the ice has melted yet."

I watch her walk away, thinking about what she said and hoping she's right. Because if she is, that means it's going to take a lifetime to get even. Caleb.

time I  
ive it. It



I STARE AT the ingredients scattered across Leon's kitchen counter with a little skeptical expression on my face. "You want me to do what?"

My neighbor picks up the recipe and passes it to me. "It's an easy one. Annemarie was able to teach even me how to make it without screwing up. Staring at the paper with pretty handwriting that must be his late wife's, but it's lower it and ask, "Why don't you just make it then?"

He grabs an apron that's hanging from the side of the refrigerator and passes it to me. "It's almost Thanksgiving. You can't show up without something. That was my wife's one big rule. This pumpkin pie will get everybody off their feet, so you're going to make it from scratch."

I lied and told him my family was doing something so he would be bad for me or offer a pity invite anywhere. But now that means baking from scratch, and all the confidence I had yesterday when talking to him about this exact thing has vanished.

While there isn't a long list of steps on the paper, it still feels intimidating. Setting it down on the counter, I notice the way he stares at the sheet with a small frown on his face, and it makes me wonder if he's truly about Annemarie.

"What are you doing for the holiday?" His frown turns into the ghost of a smile. It makes him look friendlier when that scowl most people are used to isn't there. "I work alone. I'm going to see my daughter and her family."

He's got kids? "You never mentioned a daughter before. How old is she?"

phone

Instead of answering right away, he slowly moves around the kitchen, grabs a few bowls from the cupboard and then a couple of pans from the cabinet above the sink. Once they're in front of me, he lets out a small sigh. "I'm thirty-six. We don't talk often. Not nearly as much as I'd like anyway. My name is Jenna. Annemarie and I adopted her when she was only a toddler. We couldn't have kids of our own no matter how hard we tried, so we decided to look into the local agencies about fostering and adopting."

I stare at the man and wonder if this is fate's way of intervening in my life and telling me how dumb I am. I'd never given Caleb a chance to embrace our potential reality because he'd always been so hell-bent on having his own kids. He'd talk about whose hair and eyes they'd have, which of our mannerisms would rub off on them as they got older. "Who wouldn't want a mini Raine?" he asks, hooking an arm around my waist and kissing my cheek. "I know we've got time, but I can't wait a day."

He would have been heartbroken from how long he'd have to wait for that day to come. Science can only do so much for people like me.

Nostrils flaring at the growing anger, I clench and unclench my fists, focus back on Leon and his story.

He busies himself by organizing the ingredients laid out. "The first few adoptions fell through, and it nearly broke my beautiful wife's heart. I never felt her like that..." The breath he releases is full of painful nostalgia as he runs his hand through his balding head. "I never wanted to experience that again. The day I signed the papers and officially got to welcome little Jen into our lives was one of the best days of my life. Because I got to see my Annemarie at the same time."

"Peace. Maybe you don't have to get everything you want out of life to be one hundred percent happy. Maybe you can still find peace in what's given. If it's with the right person."

Like it was for Leon and Annemarie.

I grab one of the measuring cups closest to me and toy with the handle. "Does Jenna live somewhere else and that's why you don't talk to her often?"

When his jaw clenches, I realize it's probably a conversation he doesn't want to indulge me in. But before I can switch topics, he answers. "Jenna always struggled with her history. Her adoption was closed, which means she didn't know anything about her biological parents. When she was adopted, she was only a toddler. We couldn't have kids of our own no matter how hard we tried, so we decided to look into the local agencies about fostering and adopting."

ten and seventeen, she wanted to know where she came from. We couldn't hang and it caused a bit of a...rift of sorts between us. As she got older, she  
"She's other reasons to resent us. We always chalked it up to teenage rebellion. I never got better."

toddler. Sadness settles into my chest. "But you see each other still."

so we His hands pause from grabbing the graham crackers we're so  
turning into a crust. "When Jenna found out she was pregnant with her  
son in my child, a little boy, she reached out. She told her mother and me that  
she finally understood that her past didn't matter."

went on He loses me. "It didn't?"

get and Leon shakes his head. "No. She said family are the people who love  
you even when you're a little shit. Her words, not mine. It's true though  
*and my* can't choose who you're related to, but you *can* pick your family.  
*for that* finally having one of her own put a lot into perspective for her about  
what kind of love life has to offer."

wait for One of my hands goes to my stomach. "If you don't mind me asking  
you and your wife ever get angry about not having your own kids?"

ists and My neighbor studies me, his eyes moving down to my stomach but  
he forces my hand to move away before he assumes the same thing Caleb  
did first few "We were sad," he admits. "But we still got a child, even if Annemarie  
helped seeing carry her. That doesn't make Jenna any less ours. We're the ones who  
sheltered her, fed her, and loved her. We're lucky to have had the opportunity  
every day we had privilege to raise such a wonderful woman. Not everybody gets  
that chance, even if they deserve it."

peace." Emotion that's nearly impossible to swallow crams into the back of  
my head to the throat.

you're "Word of advice," Leon says. "There's no such thing as a perfect  
family. Everybody fights. Everybody argues. Hell, sometimes people stop talking  
to each other for a while. But family is always family at the end of the day.  
It's the glass matter how your bond is formed. Flaws and all. That love will always  
see her there."

My fingers tighten at my sides before I dare picking my eyes up. "I  
don't do that."

Jenna has I'm tempted to tell him about everything.

means we Caleb and me.

turned Cody.

elp her,     *After Cody.*

e found     But as each second passes, I lose my courage to open up to somebo  
n, but it     Leon hums. “Enough stalling. Let’s get this pie done so you can  
me with more questions before your next deadline. I have a story ab  
time my wife caught me with my pants down doing my business on t  
mehowof the road in broad daylight. Woman is a saint for still loving my dr  
er firstafter that one.”

hat she     I laugh. “I’m looking forward to that story.”

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Thanks

*After Cody.*

But as each second passes, I lose my courage to open up to somebody.

Leon hums. “Enough stalling. Let’s get this pie done so you can hound me with more questions before your next deadline. I have a story about that time my wife caught me with my pants down doing my business on the side of the road in broad daylight. Woman is a saint for still loving my drunk ass after that one.”

I laugh. “I’m looking forward to that story.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

# CALEB

DAD'S ARMCHAIR IS three feet to the right of where it normally sits, me hyper focused on the indentation marks left in the carpet. The living room looks completely different ever since hospice came in with all the necessities they need to take care of Dad. Mom and one of the night nurses rearranged some of the furniture to make sure everyone could get in and out easier. There are tubes and wires and machines scattered in the corners of the room, the room smells like medicine and antiseptic.

I can tell all the changes are hard on Mom, but she never says anything about how the house has stopped feeling normal since everything was rearranged around. She puts a smile on her face as though nothing is wrong.

Dad jerks away from the woman working on his arm. "That damn it," he barks at her.

The woman, Mary, doesn't seem fazed as she offers softly, "Sorry I'll try being more careful. Only a few more seconds, okay?"

I know he can't help his temper these days, but it doesn't make it any easier watching him lash out at people when it's so far from who he normally is as a person. "Owen said that they caught the guys who broke into the store," I tell him, referring to his friend who's a retired police officer. "A couple of teenagers with nothing better to do, I guess. They tried breaking into the bank down the street a few days ago, where they ended up arrested."

Dad raises a brow at the news, distracting him from the nurse. "Vandalism? Hell would be dumb enough to rob a bank?"

"*Attempting* to rob a bank," I correct, sitting back on the couch with a smug grin when I catch the roll of his eyes. "Remember the Nardini kids? The oldest boy and one of his friends."

He thinks about it, one of his fingers scratching at the bald patches on his skull from where his hair has fallen out. "The ones who were always

in trouble for smoking weed in the school bathroom?”

“They’ve moved on to heavier stuff from what Owen told me former police chief heard through the grapevine that the boys had he them when they were brought into custody. “Anyway, Jackson confessed to a string of robberies around Lindon, hoping it would get a better deal. Threw his friend right under the bus for it all.”

Dad huffs. “Fucking idiots.”

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I nod in agreement and listen to Mom fuss around in the kitchen. R my hands down my jeans, I break the silence. “I know I already apol but—”

“I don’t want to hear it again,” he cuts me off, eyeing me firmly. “done is done, son. You can’t go back and change it. If the cops hav we’ll probably get some sort of payout, if not the actual items the back.”

I grip my knees. “I know I can’t change it, but I’ve always been about locking up. The leak at my apartment just had me a little minded that day.”

Dad shakes his head. “It’s nothing you can’t handle. You’re tou Anders men are.”

Having to look away so he doesn’t see the doubt in my eyes, I rea and scratch Frank’s head. The basset hound looks as tired as I feel.

Still, I tell Dad, “Yeah. You’re right.”

The football game playing on the screen takes up Dad’s full at leaving me sitting with their dog until I decide to go see if Mom anything.

As soon as I walk up to her, she winds an arm around my wa squeezes me. “Hi, sweetie. Everything okay?”

I nod. “Yeah. Dad is watching the game, so I figured I’d come t you need help.” I reach over and grab one of the rolls she’s putting tray to heat up. “He’s changing.”

The statement gives Mom pause, causing her shoulders to drop a f “They told us his personality would start to change.” The smile she gi is forced. “But he’s still there. I see it.”

There’s so much pain trapped behind her eyes, and I feel horrible t I don’t know how to help her.

Mom clears her throat and goes back to spreading out the dinne



“Tell me about Caleb. I feel like we never talk anymore.”

“I pull apart the bread. “We talk almost every day, Mom.”

She gives me an exasperated look. “You tell me that the store is fine and that you’re passing your classes. Nothing personal. Do you see any other people?”

Her way of hedging for information makes me chuckle. “Subtle.”

She cracks a grin. “I thought so. So are you? You went from talking about Raine and Emma to nothing about either of them. I know your father wasn’t exactly a fan of what you were doing, but you can still talk to him if you need to. What happened?”

Lips twitching, I pop another piece of the roll into my mouth. “I know Mom doesn’t like that kind of language, so I lift my shoulders when she gives me a narrowed look and say, “I messed up. You guys right. I shouldn’t have gotten involved with Emma. She’s a good person. I didn’t deserve to be sucked into my issues.”

Sadness creeps onto Mom’s face, and I hate it. Her husband—the man she loves—is dying, and she pities me for my love life. “It’s true that you want to be happy. Emma seemed to take away some of the struggle we were obviously going through.”

“Who says I deserve that though?” I question. “You’re going through as much, if not more. Where is your relief from that?”

All she replies is “You.”

I blink, confusion twisting my face.

“Seeing you live your life is good enough for me, baby boy. Everyone makes some mistakes along the way. Because that means...” Her voice softens as her gaze roams to the other room where Dad and his nurse are. “It means that you’re *living*.”

Clearing my throat to avoid the swarm of emotions, I offer her something that distracts her from the reality sitting in the living room. “I saw a diamond engagement ring. Didn’t get a lot of money for it, but I’m thinking about putting it toward the store or maybe a different truck.”

When I’m greeted by silence, I have to look up at her to see if she notices. “Does that mean things between you and Raine are over?”

Haven’t they been over since graduation? To Raine, it was obvious. “Things weren’t what I thought they were sooner than that. I just didn’t realize.”

were between us.”

“What does that mean?”

Do I tell her? Make her hate Raine as much as I want to? I don’t know that would make a difference one way or another.

“I put too many expectations on us,” I settle on. “Too much pressure.”

Mom stops what she’s doing and turns to me, reaching out to bring me back to earth. “Sometimes things don’t work out the way we want them to, Cal, but that doesn’t mean they don’t work out how they’re meant to.”

What does that mean though? Walking away from Raine is bad enough, but knowing I wasted seven years on her for the greater good is a little bit fucked up for me to accept. I don’t buy it.

*She cheated, I want to tell Mom.*

*She lied all this time.*

*She’s a horrible person.*

If I said those things, I have no doubt Mom would be angry for me, but I know she’s already angry because of Dad. Angry our lives have turned upside down. She doesn’t deserve me piling one more thing on her shoulders.

It’s my burden to bear.

“Well, I won’t ask if she’s with her family today then” is all Mom says as she goes back to prepping the rest of lunch. “Hopefully the two of you are happy in life whether you’re together or not. We both know it’s too late to be anything but.”

Almost as if proving her point, Dad starts coughing from the other side of the hallway, then yelling at the nurse for whatever she was trying to do to help.

*He’s still in there, I remind myself.*

“That’s hard wondering for how much longer.”

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MATT AND DJ are waiting for me at our normal table in the back of the hall when I drag my ass over to them and drop my notebook down. They exchange a brief look before turning their gaze on me as I sit with a glass of coffee.

“Yes, I know I look like shit. No, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Yes, Dad is the best he can be right now. No, I don't want to talk about that. That should cover the bases of their questions that usually come when we know if we see them.

Dad is taking a turn for the worse, Mom isn't handling it well, and there's a growing anger inside me that keeps nipping at my consciousness as I push my fucking turn. I'm exhausted. Stressed. Pissed off. It's a deadly combination. But because I know I'm going to combust.

The question isn't if, it's when. Enough, DJ shrugs, eyes moving from my face to the coffee I finish. "Whatever you say, my man."

Matt snickers as he pops a fry covered in the nasty mayo and ketchup he loves into his mouth. "Does that mean you don't want to hear about a dick that's on your face, or...?"

I straighten. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Grabbing my phone. I turn the camera app on and turn it forward-facing. Sure enough, there's a faded ink-drawn dick on my cheek. "How long has that been there?"

DJ clears his throat and scratches his cheek before passing me a napkin to scrub the drawing off. "You must not remember dozing off in class this morning and basically face planting onto your notebook."

"Where DJ had drawn a dick," Matt adds, grinning when I glare at him and vindictively point up at the guy responsible. "The ink transfer is pretty solid. You can even see the short hair follicles he drew on the ball—"

"Quit it. It's not fucking funny. I've been walking around campus with a dick on my face for the past two hours," I grumble, tossing the napkin at DJ's face. "You couldn't have told me that it was there before I left the damn classroom earlier?"

The former wide receiver lifts his shoulders innocently. "I wasn't gazing lovingly into your eyes when we left. I didn't even know it was there until now. Skylar was texting me about—" His eyes glimmer with mischief. "Well, it doesn't matter. Point is, I would have said something if I knew."

Matt, on the other hand, says, "I wouldn't have. Didn't you have a makeup exam today with Kroger?"

Now that I think about it, the dude who gave me a chance to take the exam I missed was giving me a weird look most of the time I sat there studying with the material. It didn't exactly give me the boost of confidence I needed as I tried figuring out the gibberish about business analytics and financial

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never I My phone lights up with a message, pulling my gaze downward  
part-time employee’s name across the top of my screen.

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Ronny: *Sorry man, Sadie is still sick*

“Christ,” I mumble.

I know it’d bite me in the ass if I gave him shit about taking care  
kid, but I don’t know if I can handle a full shift when I already pr  
hatever Mom I’d be home with Dad while she runs errands.

“You good?” Matt asks, popping another fry in his mouth and w  
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I shake my head, knee bouncing under the table as the pressure b  
my chest. “Store shit. Down an employee again. Mom wants me to ge  
by three. Dad already gave her shit about being babysat considering h  
a whole team of people constantly watching him, but it gives Mom p  
mind knowing I’m there.”

My friends exchange another look before DJ says, “Can’t you ju  
early for the day? People around here will understand. Most of the  
what’s up with your dad anyway.”

I don’t want to tell them that business is down and has been for a  
I’ve wanted to try hiring another person to help me and Ronny ou  
Mom has been gone from the scene, but we can’t exactly afford to  
right now because of the revenue we lost after the robbery. Buying a  
Raine has become a big regret since she admitted what she’d don  
money could have gone to better things. Things for me, for Mom,  
store. We still haven’t gotten a payout for the items stolen, and there  
been as many sales thanks to the new chain store that went in not even  
miles away. I’ve already closed early a few times, and Dad has been  
ass about how important consistency is for any business if I want to  
money. “Hours need to remain the same no matter what,” he told me.  
turn me into an excuse not to stay open.”

I know Dad comes from a good place when he says he’s confide  
handle anything—that I’m strong. So why the fuck do I feel anything b

Matt grabs his plate. “I’m getting more fries. You want anything  
you have to go, dude?”

I wave him off as he goes for seconds. DJ leans back with his hand at my crossed and watches me a little too closely.

“Don’t,” I tell him, scrubbing at my eyes.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re thinking something.”

“Which is scary,” he confirms, smirking.

We’re quiet for a few seconds.

Then he says, “Once things are quieter for you, maybe we could have a guys’ night. *Talk* about things. Get some shit off your chest. No catching Caleb, but you look like you’re about to snap.”

He’s not wrong. “I can feel it,” I tell him, leaning back and clenching my fists together to keep composure. I have an overwhelming urge to scream at the top of my lungs until there’s nothing else left. Talking to Matt about how he helped before, so I know it can’t hurt to admit as much to DJ. “Everything’s about to change. I know it, but I’ll never be prepared for it.”

“Bro, if there’s something I can do to help at any point—”

“Don’t you get it?” I laugh bitterly, swiping my fingers through my hair. “Nobody can do anything. The doctors can’t save Dad. The bank can’t give me more money for the hardware store. And I couldn’t save my relationship with Raine.”

For once, DJ is quiet. There’s no witty comeback or words of wisdom.

Closing my eyes, I lean forward and drop my head. Hand gripped behind my neck, I let out a long sigh. “She fucking cheated on me, gave her everything, and it wasn’t enough to keep her. Just like the way I couldn’t do enough for Dad.”

I hate that DJ is blurry when I lift my eyes to meet his, but the way he’s hiding the tears that form in my eyes as I watch him stare at me.

“She told you she cheated?”

“Not in those exact words,” I murmur, using the heels of my palms to wipe my eyes. “I didn’t need her to tell me the details. She said everything she needed to.”

“Christ,” my friend murmurs, shaking his head in surprise. He’s at a loss for words. A first for him.

Matt comes back over and drops down, tossing a fry in his mouth. “What’d I miss?”

DJ stares at me.

is arms I drop my eyes.

And Matt says, "Who died?"

Flinching, I shake my head at the innocent question. "Nobody yet."

I think DJ smacks Matt, but I'm not sure because I don't look at e  
them.

"Shit, sorry," Matt tells me. "I didn't think about how that sounded

"Don't worry about it." I push my chair out and stand, downing ev  
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"I can't talk about it right now," I tell him, knowing I'll break dow  
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I glance over at him, feeling my jaw clench as I restrain from  
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I force another nod and walk away before he sees just how muc  
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Flinching, I shake my head at the innocent question. “Nobody yet.”

I think DJ smacks Matt, but I’m not sure because I don’t look at either of them.

“Shit, sorry,” Matt tells me. “I didn’t think about how that sounded.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I push my chair out and stand, downing every last drop of the coffee in the cup. “I need to get going if I’m to get everything done that I need to.”

Before I walk away, DJ says, “Hey. Remember what I said. If you need anything...”

“I appreciate it. I’ll let you know.”

As I’m leaving, Matt follows me out after telling DJ he’ll be right back. “Wait up, man.”

“I can’t talk about it right now,” I tell him, knowing I’ll break down in the middle of campus. I’d like to hold on to what little pride I have left.

He lifts his hands. “That’s fine. I won’t push you about what’s going on. I just want to tell you that I’m here too. We’re family, man. We’ve always had each other’s backs. So whatever you need to get through, we’ll be here.”

I glance over at him, feeling my jaw clench as I restrain from crying more. “You should head back in before DJ eats all your food.”

He presses his lips together and dips his chin once, knowing that I hear him loud and clear. Grabbing my shoulder, he squeezes it and backs toward the dining hall. “Just some advice, brother. Don’t hold anything back. The more you stop yourself from feeling what you need to, the more you’re going to drown. Don’t go down with the ship to save everybody else.”

I force another nod and walk away before he sees just how much those words hit.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

# RAINE

I'M SIPPING MY espresso when Leon steps up to the table I secured around the chair across from me. "Haven't seen bags that dark under some eyes since Jenna had colic," he notes, slowly sinking down into the seat, letting out a long breath.

Setting the tiny cup down onto the saucer, I peek up at him through my lashes. "I had trouble sleeping last night."

I was in so much pain when I curled into bed that not even Motri's heating pad could help the cramps and pressure building in my back. It was so bad I debated asking Mom to take me to the hospital. But then she asked me a million questions that I didn't want to answer.

My neighbor grins. "Stay up late talking to someone?" His lips curve wider, and a chuckle rises at whatever skeptical face I must be making. "Maybe not. Sounds like it could be complicated based on that look in your eye."

I've never been good at masking my emotions. "I wish I was talking to somebody," I admit, forcing a smile. It would beat the alternative. "But no."

"Anybody in particular?"

This time, I say nothing.

Leon doesn't let me get away from the conversation that easily. "Do you have anything to do with the Anders boy?"

I toy with my coffee cup. "That obvious?"

"When you've been around as long as I have, you notice things. You were attached at the hip, and now you're not. Doesn't take a rocket scientist to know you broke up."

Trying to seem unfazed, I grab my notebook and pen out of my bag and set them on the table. "Do you think you can be friends with someone you once loved? Maybe not right away, but someday?"



“Don’t friends love one another?” Leon shoots back, reaching for the Styrofoam cup of tea I bought for him.

He has a point, but it doesn’t make me question what Caleb and I have lost. “My dad said it takes a long time to unlove somebody, and that makes me nervous that it’ll be like this forever. Even though there’s no chance of being together anymore”—especially over how I severed ties with him, which Leon doesn’t need to know—“I can’t help but feel hurt. The thought of him not being in my life...”

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It’s...tragic. More so than I want it to be.

“That’s quite the conundrum indeed,” he notes, leaning forward and swiping his hand along his jaw. “Let me ask you this. Is there a reason you can’t love him anymore?”

I give it some thought, but the only answer I come up with is “We can’t be together.”

“Neither are me and Annemarie,” he counters pointedly. “Doesn’t that tell you I’ve stopped loving her.”

There’s an obvious difference there that I blurt out before my filter can stop me. “But you can’t be.” I wince at the unfiltered truth. “Sorry. I know that Caleb and I are still around each other here. We go to the same school. Have some of the same friends. Things are complicated between us more than ever. We have no real choice but to be around each other in your foreseeable future.”

He shakes his head again. “There’s that word again. *Complicated*. My life is only as complicated as we make it. If you don’t want to be around me, don’t. Can’t say I disagree with your father though. Love is love. We always help who we fall for. It takes a long time, maybe even a lifetime to learn how to stop doing that. And quite frankly, I don’t think it’s worth it.”

“This”  
“Why not?”

He takes his time grabbing his cup and blowing on the steam billowing from the little opened tab. “The kind of love you can’t forget about is the kind. There’s a saying out there that talks about how love isn’t about loving someone you can live with but someone you can’t live without. So would you have felt like being without the Anders boy?”

Depressing.

My nostrils twitch as I hold my pen with a white-knuckle grip. “Lonely. I thought I’d spend this summer away from Lindon and climb

for the head and heart, as if it could be that easy. Maybe learn a new hobby, never thought about before. But instead, I spent it being lectured to about the evils of men by my bitter aunt who went through a horrible breakup a couple of years ago and being surrounded by old memories and past mistakes of us wasn't healing there. I was haunted."

With him, "Instead of asking me what ghosts and demons lingered, he asks, "Thought of one of the things you want to learn to do?"

The answer is easy. "Cook," I admit a little sheepishly. "I don't know how to. My dad always dealt with the meals growing up. Since he moved around and it's been takeout and delivery because Mom doesn't know how to cook on why either. And when I was with Caleb, he'd take care of stuff like that. I'm good at it too."

I used to joke that he should have gone to culinary school and become the next Gordon Ramsay—trade in footballs for five-star feasts.

His answer was always the same. "It wouldn't be the same. Cooking is only fun when it's for people I care about."

The first time he ever told me that, I knew he was destined to be a great husband and wonderful father. Somebody who would take care of his family, school, and do anything to support them.

"What?" Caleb asks, grinning up at me from where he checks for the vegetables at the kitchen counter.

I smile from the stool across from him, propping my chin on the back of my hand. "I just like seeing you all domesticated. You're feeding all your friends, house full of football players and actually making them eat their vegetables."

He waggles his brows. "It's practice. There are some picky eaters, some who test me nine times out of ten, but they eventually eat what I put in front of them. Except for DJ sometimes. He came home plastered last week celebrating the game against the Hawks and would only eat dino nuggets."

That definitely sounds like DJ. "Well, he's a kid at heart, so that makes sense."

My boyfriend shrugs, focusing back on the carrots he's cubing. "What's it many do you think you want? Kids, I mean?"

My stomach drops like it always does when kids are brought up. It's been over four years since the unexpected miscarriage. When I went to Planned Parenthood for a follow-up to go on birth control, they did blood tests when I explained the painful periods I got. They noticed cysts

y that I ovaries and told me it could be nothing.

out the But it wasn't nothing. Those cysts kept coming back, and not e couple hormonal birth control pills they put me on did anything to help.

takes. I It became obvious that the cysts were caused by somethin eventually that diagnosis came with a lot of potential conseq

What's Endometriosis. I'd done enough research to guess what was wrong b saw the official word in my medical file, and I hated knowing there c t know a day when I found out I wasn't fertile at all because of the condition.

red out, Then I would have wasted one core memory on the wrong person o cook think that was what hit me hardest. Because if I experienced that i

He was with Caleb, I wouldn't feel so horrible. He would have been there, i it'd be okay, that we'd have time. But would he have been upset that

ome the the baby? Sad that we'd missed the opportunity? If he was with me found out I was sick, would he comfort me? Or would he tell me the

king is still a chance?

Telling him anything would mean admitting I slept with someon i doting and that's a burden I plan on keeping to myself for life. Or at least i family can't keep it anymore. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

I don't like to think about the past that often, but it's in the forefron ops themind when children come up in conversation. Because there could b

when Caleb decides that the struggle isn't worth it in the long run. It' heel of I make that choice before he does.

entire "I don't know," I tell Caleb, sitting up. "My focus is on schoo es." now."

rs here His smile doesn't falter. "I get that. There's no rush." Leaning aci front of counter, he brushes his lips against mine. "We're in this together. I'r

ek after when you're ready. Maybe we'll have a little redhead. Mom says a r ets." would look cute with our eye color."

t makes I tighten my hold around the pen in my hand and shake myself ou memory. I'd blame the pain I'm in for reminding me that my repro

. "How system hates me, but it's beyond that.

It's the reason I'm here.

's been The truth.

back to Because Caleb is going to be a wonderful father someday with son d someone can give him the world.

on my And that isn't me.

“So what do you say?” Leon asks, drawing my attention back *ven thehim.*

Jaw clenching from the dark path my thoughts are taking me down, *g, and* “About what?”

*uences.* My neighbor chuckles. “Learning how to cook. I can teach you a *t before* Itwo. Annemarie house-trained me a long time ago, so I can fend for *ould be* just fine and pass down a few essentials to you.”

I unclench my jaw and take a silent breath to release the tightness. *i. And* *Ilungs.* He’d really want to do that? “I’d like that. A lot, actually.”

*moment* The second he sees the look on my face, he shakes his head. “Don’t *told me* sappy on me. You look like you could use somebody on your side right now. *I’d lost* Can’t pretend to be your father, but I can be your friend. I might be a *bastard*, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy these little outings.”

*ere was* My smile eases some of the weight in my chest that keeps trying to *me under.* “I’m glad I don’t annoy you with my questions.”

*ie else,* Leon huffs, taking a sip of his tea. “Oh, you do. But it gets me thinking *until* about what life used to be when the missus was around, so I can’t compare. *Much.*”

*it of my* I laugh under my breath because he complains all the time. But I like *e a day* makes him real.

*s better* “Now, what would you like to discuss for your assignment today?”  
He *tell you* about the time Annemarie stormed out of the house and *ol right* accidentally ran over her prized rose bushes. Took me two hours of searching *to find* her, and instead of yelling, she kissed me and told me that I over *ross the* new flowers.”

*n ready* I crack a smile. “Did you get her some?”

*edhead* His eyes lighten. “Every single year, I bring a bouquet of home *roses* from the bushes I planted for her to her grave.”

*t of the* Wow. In that moment, I know that that’s the kind of love I want so *ductive* The forever kind no matter the circumstances, even though it won’t last. *Caleb.*



nobody

I WAKE UP in the middle of the night covered in sweat and curled up



pillow pressed against my stomach. Groaning when I sit up, I wince at the stabbing pain in my lower abdomen and close my eyes to try breathing through the wave of nausea that comes with it.

It's too much.

"Mom?" I cry out, causing Sigmund's head to pop up from where he's sleeping at the foot of my bed. He lets out a little whine when I toss my legs over the side of the bed, attempting to stand despite the dizziness blurring my vision.

Sigmund is on high alert when I stumble, catching myself on the wall and knocking off one of the frames that was hanging there, the glass breaking when it hits the floor.

"Mom?" I call out again, looking down at the shattered picture of me and Caleb from prom that's lying on the floor.

Why isn't she answering?

I glance at the time and realize it's the middle of the night. Not even three yet. Either Mom is sleeping, or she never came home.

The first tear falls as I shuffle down the hallway toward Mom's room. When I push the cracked door open and see the empty bed, I frown and nearly double over when the sharp feeling becomes tenfold.

I'm barely able to see past the tears by the time I make it back to my room and reach for my phone on the nightstand. I get as far as unlocking the screen and pulling up my contacts to call Mom when the dizziness returns.

Except this time I don't catch myself.

Fingers grazing the screen, I hit the floor.

I have a strange dream, one where the pain almost feels normal when I hear dream Caleb pick me up and tell me it's going to be okay.

And because it's not real, I let myself believe it. I sink into his arms and soak up the warmth he gives me and listen to the soft-spoken promises whispered against the top of my head.

"It'll be okay, baby," he tells me.

There's air on my face. Cold but welcoming on my clammy skin.

"I've got you."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

# CALEB

I HATE THIS place. I hate the smell of antiseptic and medicine, the sound of the equipment and families talking, and feeling suffocated by the presence of the patients and staff lingering. If I never have to be at this damn hospital again, it'll be too soon.

When I woke up to Raine calling, I debated ignoring it. But my gut told me to pick up because she never called this early. Not even when we were dating.

Now I'm here, standing outside her curtained-off room in the emergency room.

*Again.*

Do I want to be here? No. Did it nearly break me when I saw Raine on the floor of her bedroom, bleeding? There were no words to describe the panic I felt thinking she was gone. The moment I sank down beside her, I had no idea what I'd find.

The thought of losing her physically destroyed me, regardless of what I did in the past. I'm not sure how to feel about that. Because I want to move on more than to cut ties with the girl sprawled on the hospital bed under a heated blanket the nurse gave her.

I want it to be over.

I want to forget her.

To move on.

But one look at her pale face, and that stupid fucking invisible string that attached us at fifteen was back, wrapping us together all over again. How would it end?

“Caleb?”

Head snapping up, I straighten when I see Emma's pinched expression. Of course she'd be working an overnight. We haven't spoken since I put Raine's dog. I told her I was sorry, she told me she knew, and that was

didn't accept my apology, and I didn't blame her.

"Is your dad okay?" she asks, genuine concern all over her face. she cares about him because they spent a lot of time together. Dad struck up conversations with her whenever she came to check on him sneak him food or snacks so he wouldn't have to eat the garbage that hospital served.

She didn't do it for me or because we were seeing each other. because she was a good person. Innocent. Loyal.

I glance back at Raine to see her still resting her eyes while the I her fluids. The doctor hasn't been in to see her yet, but a few nurses come and gone to make sure she's comfortable while she waits.

Walking over to Emma, I say, "I'm not here with him. He's at home." Those haunting gray eyes move to the room behind me before nod understanding. "Is she okay?"

I lift a shoulder. "I'm not sure, but I'm sure she will be."

Emma shifts on her feet. "Good."

We're silently standing and staring at each other while people around us.

"How are y—"

"Were you with her?" she asks at the same time as I start my question.

My head shakes. "No. I was sleeping." Another pause. "Alone."

I don't know if it's relief or something else that floods her face. I says, "But she called you and you came."

All I can do is nod. "Yes."

Once again, those eyes move away from me. This time in a different direction than Raine's room. "I'm glad she has you."

Those words sink in, weighing me down. I could tell her it isn't lying but isn't it? It's obvious I'm still there for Raine even if she may not know it.

So I choose not to say anything at all.

Emma squeezes my arm and lets go, backing toward the nurse's station. "Take care of yourself, Caleb."

I know that's goodbye, so I return the sentiment and walk back to Raine's room to find her awake.

All the redhead lying there pricked by needles says is "She's nice." There's no way I'm talking about Emma given how our conversation



about her last time ended. “How are you feeling?”

I know Her eyes drop to her lap. “A little better since they gave me pain always. She rubs her arm and fidgets with the heart rate monitor attached to my hand and finger. “I called my mom. Or...I meant to.”

that the But she didn't. She called me. Whether subconsciously or on accident. “She wasn't home.”

It was Raine shakes her head. “She's out a lot.”

We're quiet, save for the machine beeping between us.

V gives My ex breaks the silence. “I'm sorry you're here.”

es have One of my brows arches. “I'm pretty sure that's supposed to be my fault in this scenario.”

ie.” Her lips quiver at the corners. “Still...”

lding in More silence.

We sit like that for a few minutes, staring at the curtains as if we're waiting for the doctor to come. When another minute or two goes by and no one saves either of us from the awkwardness, I shift my body toward her.

e walk “Who was it?”

Her eyes shoot to me. “Who was—”

“Who did you sleep with?”

ion. I see her throat work with a nervous swallow. “You don't know who it was, Caleb. Does his name really matter?”

But she *It does to me.*

I don't know why, but it does.

“His name is Cody,” she tells me, taking me by surprise. I guess I thought she would bullshit me. Lie. Tell me it didn't matter. “I met him in Radford.”

Of course. That's the only place she could have met somebody like that, me knowing.

deserve Sitting back in the chair, I cross my arms on my chest and process the name. *Cody*. Guess she has a thing for C names.

“And no,” she adds, causing me to look back over at her. “To be honest, your question from the other day in the hospital. It wasn't worth it. No one was.”

ck into I'm about to ask what she means when the doctor finally walks in. “Cody? I'm Dr. Matthews. I'm on call tonight.”

When Raine glances nervously at me, I don't know what she's going to say. But it doesn't surprise me when she asks, “Can you go get me some water?”

to drink from the vending machine?”  
meds.” She doesn’t need any more fluids, but I stand anyway with a dip  
to her chin. Being a dick to her wouldn’t get me anywhere right now,  
comply. “I’ll come back in a bit.”  
accident. Her smile is tight, but I know there’s appreciation in her eyes when  
meet mine.

The entire way out of the room, I can only think of the name she gave  
wondering if she ever brought it up in the past without me realizing  
significance.

7 line in “Fuck,” I groan, scrubbing my tired eyes.

I really need to stop asking questions that I don’t want the answers



we both

nobody A FEW DAYS later, I walk up to Anders Hardware to see DJ waiting for  
unlock the front door, with two cups of coffee in his hands. “I had to  
talk Bea for these bad boys. She was cranky this morning because  
something Elena did. Don’t ask me what. I could barely hear anything  
besides her grumbling under her breath. Something about a dented car  
w him, tried my famous smile that Skylar says gets me everything. Apparently  
doesn’t work on Bea.”

Helping me turn on the lights, he sets one of the drinks down  
counter while I get the computer started. “I’m pretty sure Aiden is the  
thought one who could get a reaction from her with a single smile.”  
cliff.”

DJ makes a face at the statement we both know to be true, even  
without bitter about it. “That’s because Aiden *never* smiled. It made anyone  
special when they got one.”

miss this. “Jealous?” I ask, lips twitching into an amused smirk.

He lifts a shoulder. “Maybe a little. How could I not be when a situation  
answer that chooses a hottie like Ivy over a sexy beast like me?”  
one of it

I shake my head at his nonsense and fire up the computer, take  
coffee. “Don’t push it, *beast*. What are you doing here anyway? It’s Sunday.  
n. “Ms. Shouldn’t you be sleeping in or spending time with your girlfriend?”

My friend rounds the counter as if he works here and pulls out the  
going to stool for himself. “I would if Skylar didn’t decide to have a sleep  
nothing

Olive's dorm. Apparently Olive is in some type of boy crisis, which r  
of my McDonald's and eighties chick flicks to resolve. When I called  
so I'll goodnight, I heard *Sixteen Candles* in the background. They'd  
watched *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*."

en they I work around him, gathering a few of the things I need to do  
opening the store. "Is she okay?"

ave me, "Olive? Yeah. That girl is made of steel. O'Conner probat  
zing its something dumb." He's referring to the newest rookie on Pitts  
national hockey team, the Penguins. "He's a dude after all. He's be  
fuck up. We all do."

to. *Do we though?* I'd like to think I did everything I could to make  
didn't screw things up, yet here I am.

Brushing it off, I think about his girlfriend's friend and former Li  
hockey star. I didn't even know O'Conner was still doing shit with  
since he graduated. I heard through the grapevine that they had some  
casual fling during his last year at Lindon that I assumed ended when I  
off to play professionally. Playing for the big league changes people. I  
ESPN all the time getting coverage on what little ice time he gets.

"Is Sky liking her classes this semester?"

My friend stares at me, amusement coating his face. "You're re  
going to tell me, are you?"

I play dumb as I organize the receipts I have to log and file. "T  
what?"

"About you and Raine."

"What about her?" I ask, feigning innocence as I start organizing t  
the day that have been piling up around here.

Dry humor sparks his eyes when I look up at him. "You suck at  
dumb. I'm telling you, dude. You're addicted to that girl despite wh  
put you through."

This time, I shoot him a look. "Quit it. I'm not talking about it w  
right now. I don't want people butting into my business when I'm  
processing it on my own."

"Does that mean there's something there to butt into that you  
telling me?"

I eye him. "Seriously?"

He holds up his palms. "It's a small town. People talk. Especiall

equired you were seen carrying Raine into the hospital. Most exes don't go to say their way to do that for each other."

already It's not surprising that people were gossiping about us again nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach is back the more I think about before which is annoying as hell given the circumstances. "Has Raine said anything to Skylar about health issues?"

only did The question has him slowly shaking his head, obviously concerned. "And even if she did, what makes you think I'd know anything about it?"

bound to My eyes roll at his bullshit. "Let's be real, bro. You and Skylar tell me everything. If Raine said something to her, she'd tell you."

be sure I "Which means I'd be sworn to secrecy," he informs me.

Does that mean there's something going on that I don't know? So not sure. Or does that mean Raine hasn't told me again? Another half-truth that she thinks I should know. "I'll ask her. I'll ask her to feed my curiosity instead of feeding it? It's screwed up. "What ever has she got to do with you? Just because Raine and I aren't on great terms doesn't mean I don't care. That's the damn issue. I care way too much. So if you know something..."

DJ swipes his hand across his face. "I'm telling you, Caleb, I don't know anything. They haven't even hung out recently, and last I knew, their conversations were about school."

This time, I don't say anything.

"Are you really that worried?" he presses, voice softer than before.

Pressing my lips together, I shrug limply and lift my eyes back at him. "There's something going on. I feel it in my gut. But she won't tell me what it is, like fucking always, so I don't know what to think."

This girl used to bring me peace, but ever since we broke up, it's been a constant stream of nonstop questions because she won't be honest with me the way I trust her to be. I thought she could trust me with anything, but I was obviously wrong.

DJ watches me stare at the computer screen, letting me process my thoughts barely swirling in my head.

I can tell he's trying to figure out what to say, but I don't let him say anything. "If you don't mind, I've got stuff I really need to do that's going to require my focus today. I promised Mom I'd be back for lunch to help with a couple of chores around the house while Dad naps."

I had to sneak out of the apartment at nearly four this morning.

out of listening to a voicemail Mom left that broke my fucking heart. Hearing that sound so tired killed me, so I left without thinking about all the shit I had to do.

out her, I'm tired.

anything Worried.

On edge.

d. "No. It makes processing anything outside of Dad hard already, especially when everyone wants to talk to me about what's going on in my life. All each I'm feeling too much, it's difficult to properly express what's happening in my head. I try, because that's what I'd want from them. Effort.

The truth is I'm fucking *angry*. But that's not on DJ or Matt or anyone who simply wants to help make things better.

likes will "That's why I'm here, boss," my friend pipes in, grinning at me.

happened I stop what I'm doing and turn to face him fully with a serious expression twisting my face. "What are you talking about?"

I know He sets his coffee down on the counter and pushes his chair in.

your mom the other day and told her if there was anything I could do that I wouldn't know I would, since I knew you weren't going to accept the help. You are a professional both majoring in the same thing, and I'm good with numbers. She mentioned that you needed to get the books updated and handle the inventory because things with your personal life have kept you busy. I can do some of that stuff."

to him. I swipe a hand down my face, wondering why Mom didn't mention anything of this to me this morning. "We can't pay you shit right now."

"Your mom already promised to make me a ton of those peppercorns. It's been that I love so much. It's only a day here and there to take some of the load off your back. I don't expect money." Before I can argue, he adds, "He obviously could probably ask Raine to come in again if you really needed the help."

is the one who's telling everybody about you two at the hospital. For all the girlfriend is one of the nurses who works in the emergency department.

Jeff is one of the town boys who loves to gossip about everybody. I can't say apparently, his girlfriend is no different. "Jeff needs to mind his own business or I'm telling my mom not to keep sending them Christmas help here every year."

DJ smirks. "That may shut him up."

fig after We could only hope. "All I want is some privacy while I figure out

ing her out. With myself. With Dad. With..." *Raine*. Because ever since I came  
have yether off at her parents' house from the ER, I knew there was more to this  
than she was letting on. Something big.

But because DJ knows this area almost as well as I do at this point,  
snorts. "If privacy is what you want, then I hope for your sake you get it."

Humming, I smack him on the back of the shoulder and head toward the  
specially back room. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I hit Mom's number  
. When my cell up to my ear, waiting for her to answer. She always does, so  
ning in goes to voicemail, I know she's purposefully ignoring me since she  
bring up my friend's sudden appearance here.

nybody Sighing, I deposit my phone back into my pocket and grab the closest  
of papers for my helper of the day. "Look, I feel bad that she got you  
but there's no point in convincing you to leave because I know you're  
skeptical And I..." Taking a deep breath, I say, "I appreciate that you're here. R

His grin turns into a soft smile. "Anytime, man. You know that."  
"I saw have to do is ask."

to help, I poke the top paper. "These are receipts from the past two months  
id I usually try getting them counted and filed at the end of the month, but  
mentioned behind. Dad has a system that he explains in writing right here."  
sheet toward the aged Post-it taped onto the counter with faded handwriting  
some of instructions on it. "I swear, the second I don't do something the same  
way, he instantly knows, whether he's here or not."

ion any "Spidey-senses," DJ remarks, wiggling his fingers theatrically.

I huff out a dry laugh. "Or he checks the video cameras." When  
ni roll made sure to erase certain footage from since Dad nonchalantly told  
load off We haven't spoken of the incident since, and I think a big part of  
all, you because his memory isn't what it used to be. In this case, that's proba  
bly. Jeffa bad thing. "Look, if you can get that done, I can do some things in the  
his new before it picks up. Ronny is supposed to be here around two unless he  
..." again."

dy, and "What about asking—"

business "No. Just...no."

cookies DJ sighs. "Look, I know you want to play hero, especially *her* h  
matter what you feel about her, but the A-Team is a thing. They  
together even when they pissed each other off. Probably. I never a  
ny stuff watched that."

dropped I roll my eyes at him.

the story “Plus, Raine never needed anybody to save her, so you can save the theatrics and use the energy to focus on yourself for a change.”

point, he The...? “Did you smoke something before you showed up? The A it.” I have no idea what you’re trying to get at.”

ward the “The Justice League” is his reply, as if that’s supposed to bring h and puthome.

when it I’m quiet.

he didn’t “Avengers?” he offers when I make no point to speak. “Get Anders. They’re all teams that work together to get to a commonest pileKicking ass, taking names. What’s that one saying? Teamwork ma in here,dream work. That’s what we are.”

won’t. “Are you comparing us to superheroes?”

eally.” He takes another sip of his coffee before making a bitter face and All youat it. “Man, this shit is strong. But yes. Yes, I am. You could probabl off the Captain America angle. Which would naturally make me Stark.

months. I “I’m not following your logic.”

ut I got DJ flattens a palm against his chest. “I come from money. I’ll I pointfigure out how to fake being a genius though, because I failed a couplewrittenscience classes my freshman and sophomore years of college. M e exactshould be Batman instead. Can we switch universes? You could be n —”

“I’m not going to be your anything, Batboy. If you’re sticking aro ch I’ve me a favor and don’t be a pain in my ass. Including bringing Rain me to,however you’d include her in this little hero dynamic. Think you can that isthat for a few hours?”

ably not The long, heavy breath he releases is dramatic as he picks up t he backreceipt. “I’ll do my best, boss. But I’m just saying she could b calls inCatwoman if you wanted her to be.”

I glare.

“Okay, okay. If you need any entertainment, you know where me.”

ero, no “All right. I’m out.” I shake my head at his antics and walk into tl workedroom. I don’t want to feed into his sarcasm because I’m not in the n actuallydeal with it.

A few minutes later, I get a text message from my mother that bre

tension buried in my chest and makes me chuckle.

he hero

**Mom:** *I'll make him share the pepperoni rolls I'm making for him. Play nice*

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tension buried in my chest and makes me chuckle.

**Mom:** *I'll make him share the pepperoni rolls I'm making for him. Play nice*

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

# RAINE

SKYLAR HOLDS THE plastic cup full of whipped cream to Sigmund's mouth, giggling at the noises he makes as he messily licks up the dessert we picked up from Bea's. Usually, she doesn't like offering things like that because it's a waste of toppings, but I know my loving pit bull has grown her more than she admits.

"So," Skylar says, peeking up at me through her lashes. "How's your project coming? Are you almost finished with the first draft?"

Leon has been sick for a few days, so he hasn't been able to meet for our next interview. He offered to do it over the phone, but I could hear how tired he was. I dropped off a basket of goodies at his doorstep, including some hot chocolate I made from scratch from a recipe in Annemarie's and added a note telling him to feel better soon.

We may only see each other once a week, but I've gotten attached to the elderly man and his stories. I can only hope they continue long after the project ends.

"I haven't really had a chance to work on it," I admit, flinching at the impending deadline in a matter of weeks. The end of semester is quickly approaching. "I've gotten behind on work after taking some days off to rest."

Skylar's eyes turn sympathetic. "How *are* you feeling? I didn't want to pry, but..."

I didn't have to tell anyone I was in the hospital because half the class knew before I was even out. I learned that after getting a few texts from Skylar, Olive, and DJ to see if I was all right. I gave them variations on the same response.

That I was fine.

Under the weather, I think I said.

"I'm better than I was. I'm on some medication for—" I stop

realizing I haven't let anybody in on this new phase of life.

*"We're going to do some scans," the doctor on call tells me after over my file. "Chances are if the endometriosis has become more advanced then you'll need to talk to your gynecologist about medication and even surgical treatment options. We'll know more when we get the results."*

There was a weight in my stomach as I was wheeled down to radiology because I had no idea what they'd find. All I knew was my worst fear had come true. I heard the mumblings of the technicians as they were bringing me back to my room, telling me I'd hear from the doctor soon.

And I did.

*"I'd call your gyno first thing in the morning to schedule an appointment," she says with a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.*

*"There's a substantial amount of scarring showing on your ovaries and fallopian tubes, which I'm sure you know is common with advanced endometriosis. I'm not a specialist in that area, so you're better off having your doctor discuss it over that with you when you can."*

I knew what she was telling me without actually saying it. It was the same thing my gynecologist had warned me of the moment I was diagnosed: the more scarring there is, the harder it'll be to get pregnant. Medicine only delays the pain, maybe slows the progression. But it doesn't stop it.

When Caleb dropped me off from the hospital, I'd only mumbled a "thank you" before Mom rushed out of the house. I was grateful for the startled interruption because I didn't know what else to say to the man who had just taken me to the wheel.

He didn't ask what the doctor said, but I know he wanted to. It was in his eyes as he scoped me out, studied me from my frizzy bedhead down to my socked feet that he was too frazzled to grab shoes for.

Caleb worried for me.

Because he loves me.

And I love him, which is why I didn't offer the explanation.

*Hate me, Caleb,* that voice in my head pleads, hoping he'll somehow hear it.

He won't.

He never does.

I jump when a hand taps my arm. "Raine? You okay?" Skylar asks, looking at me with a space out on her face.

Refocusing, I offer her a smile. “Yeah, sorry. It’s been a long night we were talking about? The project. Right. I have some stuff from my advanced, that I’m using from our conversations about my dad and their marriage that she knows. It’ll help counterbalance the things Leon has said about ults.” wife. Show the full circle of what relationships can be like since the biology different.”

when I     Skylar stares at me, slowly nodding. I know I’m giving her the runk to myon what we were talking about, but I need the out.

I reach down and pet Sigmund. “Good boy,” I coo, taking the emotion from Skylar and setting it on our table outside Bea’s.

ule an     Eventually, she speaks up again. “Can I ask you something? It’s pr eyes. You don’t have to answer or anything if you don’t want to.”

ies and     Nerves prickle the back of my neck, but I nod anyway.

d endo.     “Did you really cheat on Caleb?”

ctor go     Her question is asked quietly, almost as if she’s uncertain if she wants an answer. And I’d be lying if I said it surprised me to hear. I somehow this works by now. Caleb probably told DJ about the boy I was wed. The DJ told the girl in front of me. It’s a natural progression in a relationship helps healthy when people tell each other everything.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I wiggle on my seat and fuss about a soft dog who’s grown so much since I got him. “It’s complicated,” I tell her for knowing how much I’m willing to divulge.

behind     Will she go off on me like Caleb did? Tell me that I’m making complicated than I need to?

s in his     “I don’t believe it,” she says. “Not that it really matters what I do to my Cheating just doesn’t seem like something you’d do. But *telling* Caleb you did would definitely be something you’d do to get him to let go.”

Am I that predictable?

Not to Caleb apparently.

Then again, it’s easier to let emotion get in the way of everything now hear Skylar is removed from it all. An outsider looking in without the rose-glasses.

“Skylar...” I sigh, gripping the leash in my hand a little tighter. Why do I do other than give her the same speech I gave Caleb? A partial fight after I combat all the white lies. “I was with somebody other than Caleb a long ago. And it’s something that I need to live with for the rest of my life.”

t. What She frowns. "Raine, it's not like you murdered somebody. If yo  
y mom with a different guy, it's not the end of the world. I just thought y  
ge, not Caleb were always together."

out his I stare at her, wondering if I should come clean. Will my con  
y're allease? Will the weight on my chest lift, even if it's only a little bit?

In my short time to decide, I make my choice and nod once. "It c  
ar around on who you ask. Caleb and I weren't even officially dating until we  
college because my parents didn't approve of me seeing anybody  
pty cupschool. We dated, but..." I lift a shoulder. "If you want to be techni  
didn't really have the whole exclusivity talk. We were just...together."  
ersonal. Does that make what I did with Cody right? Probably not. Bu  
young and dumb. I made a mistake simply because a boy was  
attention to me, and I soaked it in.

"I was sixteen when I met Cody during summer vacation. It was or  
ie truly and I've never seen him again. But..." When I feel my throat con  
I know decide not to dive into the details. "Well, that's it. I lost my virginity t  
ith, and random boy and never spoke of it again. A lot happened after that, thi  
nip. It's make it so much harder. I didn't tell Caleb until now because I told my  
didn't need to know. Told myself it didn't matter."

ver the I knew better.

her, not It mattered.

It did then.

it more It does now.

Clearing my throat, I sit straighter. "So yeah. I guess I sort of che  
I think him. We'd been seeing each other, but not seriously. We hadn't  
leb that anything. Hadn't shared rules or boundaries. I'm asking you not to t  
Sky. Can you keep this between us?"

When I eye her, I wonder what she's going to say. Will she tel  
soon as we leave here? Will he tell Caleb? It's a game of telephone, b  
ig else much of the information will be right by the time my ex picks up the p

colored Skylar sits back in her chair. "Raine, I think you need to tell hi  
didn't do anything wrong. Do you really think it's fair to put you  
hat can through all this? Especially Caleb when he's going through enough?"

truth to The one thing I've learned about life without needing to stu  
ng time psychology of it is that it isn't fair. We're tested every single day  
' choices both we and other people make. Maybe if that were differe

u weredidn't take the easy route out, I would have been tempted to make  
rou andwork with Caleb.

That's not the path I chose though.

science So I answer honestly. "No, it's not." I press my lips together and  
tugging on Sigmund's leash to get him to stand. "But that's life som  
lependRight?"

left for All Skylar does is frown.

in high "I'll talk to you later, okay? I should probably get working on this  
cal, webefore I get any more behind."

' She nods. "Okay. Talk later."

t I was I don't know if I trust she'll keep quiet, but I don't have the en  
payingcare.

ie time,

strict, I



o some THE NEXT FEW days are more of the same. I don't call my doctor beca  
igs that afraid to. Mom sneaks out and sneaks back in from doing God knows  
yself he work on the end of semester assignments and try compiling all my no  
a cohesive paper, work my shifts at Bea's, and try keeping to myself.

Key word: try.

Mom is quiet at breakfast as I slide some of the scrambled eggs  
onto two separate plates and place some of the pancakes I made onto  
us to split. I burned the first three, but it's better than the entire

ated on, butchered the first time I attempted to make them a few weeks ago for  
defined

When I turn to place her food in front of her, I frown when I  
all him, pinched look on her face as she stares at some of my homework sp  
across the other half of the table.

I DJ as "I never understood why you loved this stuff so much," she te  
out how shaking her head. "It was like overnight you decided you wanted  
hone? people with their problems."

n. You I sink into the chair I pulled out for myself. "I don't know if  
irselves overnight, but I like helping people. You know that."

I've always been that way—holding doors open for people, off  
idy the listening ear, being the mediator between Mom and Dad. I know they  
by the biggest reason I am where I am.

ent, if I

things It could be worse.

“Well, when did you know?” she asks, causing me to arch my back. I didn’t expect her to wonder because she rarely asks about school beyond the basic “how was your day” in passing.

Sometimes I never cared. It was easier not to get into the details when she was a big part of everything. Picking up my fork, I move around some of the dishes and say, “I guess it was when you and Dad started fighting more.”

project They always bickered about something, no matter how small the project was. Clothes or dishes, not having any groceries, the house being messy, the lawn not being mowed. I used to think it was normal. Because it was to me.

energy to I can’t look Mom in the eyes when I add, “It was the day we were supposed to go see that new musical in the city. I remember being excited because we hadn’t been since *Cats* came out, and you guys said we could see the Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building. But then Dad got a call about something that couldn’t wait until we were back, and we went.”

use I’m what. I tes into loud. It was one of their worst fights. I’m not sure what all was said, but it was loud. It wasn’t the first time I heard them argue, but it was the first time I left and didn’t come home until the next day. She was crying when she walked out the door, that much I knew for sure. She tried hiding her face and red eyes, but I was sitting on the other side of the bookshelf, directly faced the front door, so I saw everything.

I make one for batch I us. When Dad found me hours later in the same spot to tell me dinner was ready, he promised that she’d be back.

see the “She always comes back,” he told me.

rawled And I remember thinking to myself, *but why?* That question led to the next five, which turned into hundreds of questions about why anybody did the things they do. I wanted to help Mom and Dad, but I knew I wasn’t going to fix for their main problems.

ills me, to help “We weren’t that bad,” Mom tells me, rolling her eyes. “Don’t be so melodramatic. You were never abused. You had a roof over your head and food in your stomach. We rarely told you no. I’d hardly say you had anything to be growing up because of us. There are far worse people you could have grown up with as parents.”

it was ering a y’re the Typical. “You always do this,” I exclaim in exasperation. “You complain that I don’t talk to you about things, but the moment I do, you accuse

being dramatic. Just because you never beat me as a child doesn't mean I'm dramatic. I grew up in a stable, happy environment. You and Dad had a lot of problems, and I had to be the witness to them all."

"I find it amusing that you don't think you're dramatic considering you're making a big production right now."

I blink, absorbing her tone. "Wow. Okay. I'm just trying to answer your question, Mom. I'm sorry if you feel attacked—"

"Attacked? You know what, Raine? I do feel attacked. Your father and I have done so much for you. We've always cheered you on and supported your success. And now you tell me that you're studying all this hard work because of him and me? No. We shielded you from so much growing up excitement. Don't pin this on us."

I take a deep breath to calm my tone so this doesn't escalate more. "I know you're a workaholic, but that's not true. I saw it all. Heard it all. Even when you didn't talk to me, I was paying attention."

Is it so bad to be the reason I'm so motivated? I'm building a future for myself because of them. There isn't any blame, only gratefulness.

I don't get a chance to tell her how much she's influenced me because she decides to take this conversation one step further. "Before you cast your shadow in such a good light, think about how close you were to making that mistake I did. If you hadn't broken up with the Anders boy, then you would have wound up exactly where I am. Miserable and divorced. Be grateful you were never got pregnant to add single mom to that list."

All I can do is stare in disbelief at how quickly this turned around.

She locks eyes with me. "You are more like us than you want to admit. You're always so close to making choices that will ruin your life."

It's hard to restrain myself as I move my chair back. "I'm so sorry for not having me. It was such a huge inconvenience to your life plans, Mom. I know I must suck to have settled with two people you didn't really want and to be so young. Some people would feel like the luckiest people on the planet to have had what you did."

Is it bad? *Me included.*

Tears prickle the backs of my eyes as I grab my plate and walk to the kitchen to dump it into the garbage bin. Before I walk out of the room, I hear Mom complain "The eggs were rubbery."

I manage to hold in the tears long enough to get Sigmund and his



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**Mom:** *I'm sorry*

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She never was good at saying that in person. Which is why I choose to accept the apology, knowing it's the best I'll get.

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**Me:** *It's okay*

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It isn't. But it'll have to be.

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It isn't until I'm down the street that I feel my phone buzz in my back pocket.

**Mom:** *I'm sorry*

She never was good at saying that in person. Which is why I choose to accept the apology, knowing it's the best I'll get.

**Me:** *It's okay*

It isn't. But it'll have to be.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

# CALEB

DAD ISN'T EATING. Barely sleeping. Not even talking much, with especially concerning. This is the same man who could befriend anybody he passed on the street. I watched him have conversations with anybody he came across—bag boys, door greeters, customers at the store, even the sassy woman down the street who hates everybody.

That man no longer exists.

I don't know the one who took his place.

Last week, he called me Jake.

We don't know who that is.

He didn't recognize Mom last night.

I heard her crying in her room.

The nurses say it's almost time.

*Almost time.* As if we're getting close to a big event. Like some fucked-up deadline.

"Cal!" I hear called out from behind me as I walk through campus like a zombie. I'm on no sleep and failed melatonin. I'm terrified that I won't show up if Mom calls me about Dad, so I choose exhaustion. It's not ideal during the remaining weeks of the term, but it is what it is.

I turn, noticing a skinny kid wearing a Lindon football jersey walking toward me. He's one of the newbies on the team—a sophomore who was training with us last spring to prep for the new season.

He stops a few feet away. "Hey. I don't know if you remember me. I played with you before you graduated. I'm—"

"Wells," I say for him. "I know."

His face lights up. "Shit. Awesome. A few of my buddies said they'd like to bother you because of—" He abruptly cuts himself off. "Er, well, I saw you and wanted to see if you got the invite."

I blink. "What invite?"

“To coach.”

To...? “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Wells, the delusional sophomore, nods enthusiastically. “A bunch of us were talking about it, and we all agreed you’d be a perfect addition to the coaching staff they’re trying to grow here. You know the game, the turf, and all the plays. Plus you’re familiar with the team. It’d be perfect. Better than all the fuckwads they’ve got wandering around scratching their balls and acting like they know what they’re doing. I don’t think the new staff knows what is happening half of the time.”

“Look, Wells. It’s nice I was brought up for consideration, but that’s the last thing on my mind right now. I’m sure whomever they’ve hired for the job just fine.” I don’t bother pointing out that we’re not exactly a Division I school or anything. The staff that comes in is going to be subpar at best.

Hell, they can’t be any worse than the people they let go, considering the major lawsuits that could have been on the school’s hands otherwise. Pearce, who’d been an exceptional coach who earned Lindon a lot of respect over the years, didn’t have the best moral compass. He was willing to go the other way when one of his players was accused of doing some shitty shit to women at parties because he wanted to make sure he was kept on the team. Who knows what else he let some of the guys get away with?

Wells’s shoulders drop defeatedly. “I know you’ve got a lot going on maybe after...” He stops himself again. “I just mean when things die—” He winces, face turning red at the poor choice of words that definitely hit me straight in the gut.

“Wells?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop talking while you’re ahead.”

He presses his lips together, the color on his cheeks darkening before he nods.

I glance at the time on my watch. It’s old but the band is new. It’s one of Dad’s old watches that Mom kept in her jewelry box after he stopped wearing it. Mom gave me the band and told me to keep it the other day. I didn’t because it felt wrong to take anything of his. It felt...final.

But having it on my wrist oddly makes me feel like I’m close to him. Backing up, I say, “I’ll think about it, but don’t hold your breath.”

Will I actually think about it? Probably not. I’ve had enough on my

lately that's left me too preoccupied. I've been debating even staying at school or if I should consider other options.

Dad was insistent that I let go of some of my classes because he thought I'd need them to run the store, and I know he's not wrong. Maybe it's time to really think about where I'm going with my life since shit is about to change.

Wells nods, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. "You're willing to pay for staff members' degrees while you're working for them as long as you get your degree? And I know you're studying for your MBA, so..." His shoulders lift. "I'll know, man. It's just something to consider before you turn it down."

I look back to Wells. "Like I said, I'll think about it."

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Closing my eyes, I collect myself and head into the kitchen, where Mom is pulling a pie out of the oven. As she sets it down on the stovetop, I notice Dad's skin is turning yellow.

Mom tries to smile, but it doesn't hold. "I know, sweetie. The bloodwork and it's in his liver. We knew it would happen though. It's spread in this stage."

My nostrils flare with anger, but I force myself to breathe through my nose. "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

My mother is quiet for a long time, staring at Dad's favorite pie. She's been doing that a lot, even though he never eats any of it. It makes me feel better. She gives it to the nursing staff or our neighbors and sends it home with me to give to the boys.

"I don't know, Caleb. I really don't."

Leaning against the counter, I prop my chin on my hand. "How are you holding up? No bullshitting me."

She eyes me, still hating me using bad language around her. A

y mind

g at the there's a little normalcy in our lives. "I'm not sure. It's always going to be your father. I'm...processing, I suppose. For what comes next."

he didn't *Next.* A heaviness settles into my stomach. "What *does* come next? Maybe it's the woman who's always had my back shakes her head. "I don't know what I'm going to make for dinner. So I guess what comes that."

You got I reach over and grab two forks from the tray they're in, then pass them to Mom. "Well, you already made pie. Nothing against dessert for dinner here. Her sigh isn't defeated or approving. "It's hardly nutritious."

'I don't I stab into a piece of apple. "It's got fruit."  
Mom's laugh sucks up some of the tension in the room. "You're wrong. And it's not like your dad is going to eat any, so more for us. Right? She's trying, and I respect that.

"When you said it was always Dad," I say, staring at the steam rising between us. "How did you know? Was there any doubt?"

as soon Raine asked that once upon a time.  
I have no doubt Mom knows why I'm asking when she pats my hair. "I wouldn't say there was doubt, but that doesn't mean we didn't have hardships."

he Mom "Really?"  
She nods. "We wanted kids at different times. Debated about going somewhere else instead of settling here. We couldn't figure out the time, but we did it all but had to trust it'd wind up exactly how it was meant to. Once things accepted that, we were okay."

ough it. All I can do is nod slowly.  
Mom reaches over and knocks her knuckles against my skull. "What is going through that thick head of yours, baby boy?"

dessert. The same thing that always is. "I just feel like I need to talk to Mom. Maybe after finals so I can be clearheaded for them."

kes her I don't miss the tiny smile that begins curling her lips. I'm afraid to get her hopes up, but I can't stop it. "I think that's a good idea."

ls some The fact that's all she says tells me nothing, and I don't know if I should be grateful or upset for her lack of insight. She's trying to make me figure it out on my own like any loving mother would for her son.

are you "Caleb?" I hear called out in a raspy tone from the living room.  
At least I perk up at Dad's voice.

g to be “Let me know how it goes,” Mom tells me, but I don’t know if she  
with Raine or with Dad. Because they’re both unstable relationships.

” When I walk into the room where Dad is, he’s propped up in h  
t eventrying to adjust a pillow behind his back.

next is “Here,” I say, stepping over to help him get comfortable.

“I’ve got it. I said I’ve *got it*,” he snaps, all but smacking my han  
s one tofrom him.

.” I hold up my hands and back up. “Sorry. I was just trying to help.”  
on the edge of the couch cushion closest to him, I brush off the hurt c  
to my rib cage. “What’s up? Do you need anything?”

’re not Dad stares ahead, not seeming to focus on anything in particular  
light?” his eyes slowly move toward me. “Everything is going to be okay, son

I blink at the unexpected words. How could he say that? “I don’t l  
dish inI can agree with that, Dad.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

Jaw twitching, I clench my hands together and squeeze them. “Eve  
and. “Ihas a choice. Maybe mine is to be pissed off.”

ave our He shakes his head. “That’s no way to live your life. You have s  
years ahead of you. Don’t waste them being angry.”

Despite myself, tears prick the backs of my eyes. Hot, angry te  
movingburn the ducts. I try blinking them away.

ning of “Christ,” I grumble, swiping at my face. I never liked crying, esp  
nce wein front of him. If he can be strong, I need to be too. “Don’t do this t  
can’t...” My voice cracks.

He’s slow, but he manages to reach over and touch my hand. I  
lightly.closer to him, I soak in the warmth of his palm. “I’m real proud of you  
you to know that. You’ve gone through hell and have come out of it.  
Raine.all I could ever ask of you.”

Sniffing back tears, I suck in a deep breath and let it out. Dad is p  
d she’llme despite all the ways I’ve struggled these past few months, and that  
than enough. “I appreciate that more than you’ll ever know. And...”

should *I’m going to miss this*, I say silently.

igure it He doesn’t need me to tell him that.

He knows.

And the longer we sit there like that, simply holding on to each o  
dear life, I process his words.

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## Chapter Thirty

# RAINE

LEON FINISHES READING the final draft of my paper that I printed before putting it down and setting his glasses on top of it. “It’s good. You sound like you know what you’re talking about, so I’m sure you’ll be a Hell of a lot smarter than I am, that’s for damn sure.”

I roll my eyes as I grip the cup of coffee he poured for me. “Trust me, I’m not that smart. I think it’s a solid B, but we’ll see. We get our final grades sometime next week.”

It took me a few sleepless nights to finish writing this because I was procrastinating. Writing Leon’s interview was easy, but delving into my past and putting it down for Mom...

Leon’s eyes roam downward. “Has your mother read this yet?” The moment he’s met by his sighing. “Does she know you wrote her into this? If you said, she didn’t want to help.”

I *may* have forged her signature on the initial proposal I submitted to Professor Wild. I was running out of time to find somebody, and saying things about her divorce that contributed to a well-rounded proposal would have been silly to pass it up. Plus I’ve done it plenty of times growing up when she’d forget to sign things for school. I know her signature by heart. “She hasn’t read any of my homework since I was in elementary school, even then, she hated doing it. It isn’t as if she’ll know.”

He eyes me in disapproval. “Don’t know if I condone that, but it’s your life. How are the two of you doing?”

I told him about our argument and said we made up, but there was still tension in the house. If I don’t censor topics, like Dad or Caleb, everything gets murky. I’ve learned it’s better not to talk about it than to deal with the repercussions of the fallout.

Maybe that’s why I added our conversation to the paper, posing it as a conversation between her and Dad to fit the paper’s topic guidelines. Did I feel a

bad when I was doing my final readthrough? A little. But I keep myself there are worse things I could have done.

*Right?*

“We’re okay,” I say, staring into my coffee and watching the billow from the top. “She’s taking me for a procedure in a couple of It’s minor, nothing to worry about.”

That doesn’t seem to relax his arched brows as he stares at me for him feeling all right?”

Wetting my lips, I raise the cup to take a sip when I remember w od, kid. gyno told me during our visit last week. Coffee can trigger endom I ace it. flares. So can half the things I love eating, which I’ve tried cutting b ne, I’m despite Mom telling me I’m being overdramatic.

But Mom doesn’t know the extent of my diagnosis because I’ve grades played it off like it’s nothing. When I told her about the lapar I kept procedure I’m being put under for, her tune changed. After she gave r what I for keeping all my problems from her. Gone are the “it’s just a per some chocolate and toughen up” pep talks she used to give me when e flinch tell her I was in excruciating pain during my cycle, and in their p s? Last someone who seems to actually care.

I know she isn’t happy with me keeping things under wraps ins itted to telling Dad and my friends, but it’s easier this way. The fewer peop he was worry, the better it is to handle.

Putting my coffee down, I lean back in my chair and debate just oject. It Leon what I’ve been wanting to know since he said his wife struggled growing kids. I know if I ask for information, it’s only fair to offer it. y heart.

Out of anybody I could tell, wouldn’t Leon be the safest because I ol. And most removed?

Weighing my options, I make my decision and ask, “Is there a :’s your Annemarie couldn’t have children? Was she sick? I only ask because I e’s still with something that’s probably going to ruin my chances of ever havin b, then I’m not telling you that for pity or anything. I just don’t want to pry un an deal He frowns. “I’m sorry to hear that. We were never given a

unfortunately. Once upon a time, we would have liked one. At least t had a reason for it. But no. It’s a mystery to this day.”

Would it be better that way? Or am I the lucky one for a : as one tiny bit understanding why I am the way I am?

telling “If you don’t mind me asking,” Leon speaks up, “is that the reason  
and the Anders boy split up? Was he unhappy with that possibility?”

There’s a fire in his eyes that I can tell is directed at Caleb, so I try  
to steam to extinguish it. “I never told him. I broke up with him because I love  
him so much to put a hold on his happiness. He wants kids so bad, Leon. He  
brings it up all the time, and it’d freak me out knowing there’d be a  
chance. “You could resent me for not being able to. I mean, he loves me—*loved* me  
—maybe it wouldn’t have been that bad. But...I didn’t want to take  
my chance.” Saying it out loud sounds stupid now, but fear can make people  
do a lot of silly things. “I already know what I’m going to be told one day  
and my gut feeling at this point, and my gut is never wrong. I figured it was better  
to let him go now before we couldn’t turn back in the future.”

My neighbor stares at me for a long time before shaking his head.  
“That’s a little copious back what I said. You’re an idiot. Because that might be the dumbest  
thing I’ve ever heard.”

There’s a brief moment when I’m silent as I stare at him.

Leon breaks it with “But I suppose it’s also one of the sweetest  
things I’ve heard. You love him so much you’d give up your happiness

That’s something I can see Annemarie doing.”

“*But she didn’t.*” “She stayed though.”

He gives me a lopsided smile. “Poor woman was stuck with me but  
divorce was frowned on by the time we had our problems with child  
support. Maybe if we’d known sooner, she would have let me go too. Someone  
who loves you that much is willing to do anything, I suppose. No matter how  
drastic.”

I can’t look him in the eyes.

“Do me a favor though,” he says, pulling my hesitant gaze back to  
me. “Don’t settle for less than you deserve. Annemarie was my forever  
girl. I’m sick I wouldn’t change a thing. Can’t picture myself with anybody else. You  
know how to ask yourself the same thing about your boy.”

“My boy.”

I swallow. “He’s not mine anymore.”

All Leon does is hum, as if he doesn’t buy it as much as I do. Then he  
switches gears. “Why haven’t you brought that crazy-ass dog of yours  
out at least a while? Been thinking about getting a pet myself lately. Annemarie  
had a cat, but I’ve always been a dog man.”

son you     And just like that, we move on.  
              Like I should do with Caleb.

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DAD WAVES AT me from the table in the back corner when I walk into B  
Diner. A few people turn my way with big smiles as I walk over to t  
who's standing with one of his arms out to hug me. "Hi, pumpkin."  
He pulls my chair out for me and waits until I'm sitting before goin  
to his seat. That's when I notice the milkshakes already on the table,  
the glasses of water.

"I already ordered our usual," he admits, looking a little sheepish.  
that's all right. Figured even though we're celebrating the end of tern  
still be getting the same thing."

My eyes go to the cherry still perched on the top of my milkshake  
didn't take the cherry," I note stupidly, wiggling out of my jacket and  
it drape across the back of the chair.

Dad grins, tugging his milkshake closer to him. "Of course not. Y  
cherries."

I blink at the statement. "I do." My brows pinch when that soaks in  
knew that this whole time?"

His chin dips as he takes a sip of his drink. "I'm not always the  
picking up on things, but there are very few things that I *don't* notic  
you, Raine."

A ball of emotion swells inside my chest, tightening around my  
"That's..." I'm not sure what to say. "Sweet. Thanks."

Dad laughs. "If something as small as realizing what food you like  
you emotional, I've clearly failed as a father."

"Don't say that," I tell him, moving hair behind my ear.

A small smile curves upward on my father's face. "Look, I kn  
faults. I obviously wish I could have changed how certain things ha  
over time, but I can't. I can only try to make up for it. Which mean  
present when I can now. Supporting you however I can."

I'm not used to this side of Dad. "You don't need to make



anything.”

“I do,” he says. “Your mother and I didn’t agree on a lot, but we have always wanted you to be happy.”

I grab the cherry from my milkshake and stare at the bright red color. I know that.”

He slowly nods, almost as if he’s trying to figure out what to say. It isn’t like he’s ever been a sappy person. Talking about feelings isn’t his thing. So this is...weird. Nice, but weird.

The moment is broken only for a brief pause as the waitress comes back with our food and a friendly smile.

Once she leaves, Dad reaches into the inner pocket of his jacket. “I have something I need to give you.”

When he slides a check across the table, I nearly choke at the amount made out for. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

“Money,” he answers simply, grabbing his napkin and tucking it into the collar of his button-down. “Your mother and I have been spending some of the money together”—I sit straighter and stare cautiously at him—“because we’ve been working on selling the cabin in Virginia. It didn’t take long to sell once the listing posting went live, and we just recently got the money. Your aunt and I agreed that the money was better spent on you after a couple months of back-and-forth. You can use this to pay your debt and do whatever else you want with it. You should consider getting a new car so you’re not cornered by nickel-and-diming yourself on the one you have. Even Dale said that the car needs to be put out of its misery, even with the work Caleb put into it.”

Caleb? “What are you talking about?”

Dad’s brow furrows. “Caleb went over to Dale’s and checked out the car. Worked a few hours on it with Dale’s brother during the off hours when they were so backed up. He didn’t tell you?”

Swallowing, I slowly shake my head. Why would he do that for me if I didn’t know.” My focus goes back to the steep number, double-checking I’m seeing where the comma is correctly. “I don’t know what to say. I’ve never in a million years thought Tiffany would agree to selling the Radcliff house. We have so many memories there.”

“Neither did we,” he admits. “It turns out she’s been wanting to move closer to family, so your mother loaned her some of the money from the sale to get her up here.”

It's been a long time since my family has been this close together. We both Tiffany is moving to New York? I thought she hated it here."

Dad reaches for the ketchup bottle, opening it and putting some on the fries. "I guess she hated being alone more," he reasons, carefully cap and setting it in front of me. "She wants to be closer to your mother. It's good that they'll have each other. Your mother has been missing her." A sinking feeling settles into my stomach over the cabin being gone like that. It was the one place I could go to when I needed an escape. Somewhere to go in the summers when I needed time to think. Then it became the very place that suffocated me with poor choices that are bound to go of.

I guess having nowhere to run to isn't such a bad thing. Picking up a fry, I study it and sigh. "This still seems like such a deal that I can't wrap my head around. You and Mom don't do anything. If this is Mom's way of trying to make up for some of the time between us—"

"That's not it," Dad cuts in, shaking his head firmly. "This has everything to do with the fact that you're her daughter—the one person she's ever loved."

There isn't any sadness in his tone when he says that, but I can see a plea in his eyes.

"I don't think that's true at all. Look how much time she's spent with you if she didn't love you."

His smile is empty. "We're not getting back together, princess. The paperwork was finalized a few weeks ago. We're officially divorced because we spent so much time together because we genuinely wanted to figure out how we could help you. That sort of support isn't something either of us could give to us, which is another reason our relationship was doomed from the beginning. Your mother wants to make sure she's always part of your life. I never even if she's being difficult. So do I. We all need to get along to make sure that happens."

I have no idea what to say. My throat thickens as I try swallowing. I glance up at him from the check, I shake my head. "You didn't have to do this."

"We know."

. “Aunt     A single tear escapes the corner of my eye that I quickly swipe a  
love you, Dad.”

side his     Dad passes me a clean napkin for my eyes. “I love you too,  
oping itAlways have, always will.”

It’ll be     The fact that Mom and Dad get along better when they’re divorc  
lost on me. It gives me hope that a split isn’t the end for everybody.

one just     It could be the beginning.

escape.     And maybe that means the “curse” I was told about for so long  
again, itreally amount to anything. My parents might not be totally happy, but  
etter letbuilding something for themselves anyway. They’re at peace wit  
choices.

That counts for something.

a huge     Dabbing my eyes, I clear my throat and try changing the subject l  
we mestart bawling in front of everybody in the diner. “So tell me about t  
tensionproperty you started showing.”

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A single tear escapes the corner of my eye that I quickly swipe away. “I love you, Dad.”

Dad passes me a clean napkin for my eyes. “I love you too, kiddo. Always have, always will.”

The fact that Mom and Dad get along better when they’re divorced isn’t lost on me. It gives me hope that a split isn’t the end for everybody.

It could be the beginning.

And maybe that means the “curse” I was told about for so long doesn’t really amount to anything. My parents might not be totally happy, but they’re building something for themselves anyway. They’re at peace with their choices.

That counts for something.

Dabbing my eyes, I clear my throat and try changing the subject before I start bawling in front of everybody in the diner. “So tell me about the new property you started showing.”

## Chapter Thirty-One

# CALEB

**R**AINE'S HAND IS braced against the side of the West End Anthro Building, with her head bent down and hair falling over her shoulder. There's no hesitation before my feet turn me away from my typical my last final and right toward the girl in distress.

The image reminds me of one of the first frat parties we went to college. She swore up and down that she wasn't going to drink again at a party we went to in high school that led to her becoming well acquainted with Leon Applebee's hedges.

*"I mean it this time," she slurs, wobbling on shaky legs as I walk toward the football house. "No more, Caleb. Alcohol is gross."*

*"I know, babe," I muse, trying not to laugh as she groans. We stop so often when she thinks she's going to puke but manages to keep it down.*

*The second her head hits the pillow, she's out like a light. I manage to take her shoes off, pull the blanket over her, move the waste basket by the side of the bed, and put two painkillers on the nightstand next to a glass of water she'll need in the morning.*

*When the sun comes up, I'm there with a stuffed bear wearing a mask and holding a sign that says GET WELL SOON. I found it at the drugstore when I went out to get us something greasy to eat to help the hangover.*

*She stares at the bear for a long moment before moving her eyes to look at me. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."*

*I smile. "I love you too."*

Stopping next to the girl in distress, I ask, "What's wrong?" and my hands fall between her shoulder blades. She stiffens underneath my touch, but she splits second before relaxing when she looks at me with glassy eyes.

Moving her hair behind one of her ears helps me see how pale she is. Her cheeks are flushed as she straightens and turns her body away from me, letting my hand fall back to my side. "Just don't feel well. I walked j

dining hall and smelled something foul. What's new, right?"

"I'm sorry," I say half-heartedly, giving her a quick once-over and the way she cradles her abdomen. "I can grab you some water if you need it."

There's a tired glaze to her eyes as they meet mine again. "I'll be finished my last exam, so I'm on my way home to rest anyway."

I jab my thumb behind me. "Do you want me to walk you to your car? I'd feel bad if something happened to her. She's unsteady on her feet." She straightens out and presses her fingers to her temples.

"I walked," she admits sheepishly. "I haven't gotten my car back yet. Dale's. Thanks for looking at it, by the way. You didn't have to."

I should have known she'd find out. "I told the guys at the garage about it and asked if I could take a look. It was no big deal." Dale's brother stays late to tinker on an old convertible he's restoring, so he was more than happy to let me stick around when I couldn't sleep.

"It is," she counters quietly. "I didn't deserve that courtesy."

Choosing not to comment on that, I tell her, "I'll drive you."

She looks at me for a second, probably wondering why I didn't talk about her car, but eventually nods. "If you're not going to be in class, I'd appreciate it. I'm hoping the garage will get my car in this week. I can get it back before the big storm rolls through next week."

The sidewalks are cleared off fairly well right now, but I know during the time she would have needed to leave to get here, the town would have had to come by to shovel or salt them.

"I've got some time to kill before my next test, so I'll drop you off. I'll see about going over to Dale's. If he can't get it in anytime soon, Ed might be able to."

As we're walking toward the parking lot, I can't help but notice her white-knuckle grip on her bag strap that she loosens for a moment before tightening her hold again. There's something on her mind. She always gets like this when she's deep in thought.

Falling into step with her, I decide to try lightening the mood. "Ever wonder what your mom and dad doing?"

If she's grateful for the subject change, she doesn't really give it a thought. Her shoulder lifts weakly as she stares straight ahead at the line of cars in the commuter lot. "Okay, I guess. I think Dad may have been here before I got home from Bea's. It smelled like him—his cologne. I

missed it. Their situation is confusing. For a while, I even thought they would see each other again. I missed seeing them together.”

“Mom mentioned seeing Raine’s parents together around town and it’s okay. If they were still going through the divorce. I think a lot of people are confused about their situation since it seems like they like each other more now than they have for years. “Would it be such a bad thing if they tried to get back together?”

The question has her lips pressing together for a moment before she looks away from contemplation. “You and I both know that their marriage was never going to last. You’ve witnessed the fights. It was a long time coming. Nothing about it would change if they decided to try again.”

She hasn’t always been the closest with her parents, which is why she’s more often found herself spending so much time with mine, but she values her time with them even when she has to endure them complaining about each other to her. “I don’t envy her. If my parents were like that...”

Well, no. Maybe I’d prefer it if they were.

If all I had to deal with was their separation, then at least they’d be alive. Not together, but existing. That’s better than the reality I’m living with now. I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this. I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this. I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this.

I’m sure Mom would have chosen that fate for them over what they’re dealing with now. Who wants to see the love of their life fade away? I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this. I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this. I wish I could see them again, but I don’t want to see them like this.

So yeah. If I could choose, I’d definitely want a redo. Awkward as hell, but I’d take it over what we’re dealing with now.

Swallowing down that envy, I can’t help but wonder about the possibility of her and the girl climbing into the passenger side of my truck.

Eventually, the admission that breaks our silence has my guard loosening a fraction. “I was jealous of Emma, even though I had no right to be.” She shifts, hands fiddling in her lap. “She seemed really nice when she was with you. And she’s pretty, smart, and kind. On paper, you two make a great couple. And that...hurt.”

Why is she telling me this now? “I’m not with Emma anymore. She’s

y might of this matters. It's moot."

Her body turns toward me. "But don't you get it? It *should* matter. I'm stuck in a cycle that neither of us seems to know how to break. I have no right to be jealous or act like you being with someone like her isn't okay. Not after what I did in Radcliff. You're not mine because I did getgo."

Those words strike me right in the chest.

ment in *You're not mine.*

going to "Thanks for the reminder," I murmur, shaking my head as those words echo in my head. As if it needs to be reiterated, I feel the need

her, "I'm not Emma's either, even if you think we're somehow a shematch on paper. Spoiler alert, Raine. There's no such thing. Look at them this supposed cycle you mentioned. You were with someone else, and I'm still not over you. What the fuck does that say about me?"

The noise coming from Raine is indescribable, but the expression on her face is humorous. "I didn't mean to say that in a harsh way, I'm just trying to say that..."

When she stops, my brows inch higher up my forehead in confusion.

"You're trying to say what, exactly? That you'd be okay with me being with someone someday, but not now? If not Emma, then some other girl? They're trying to say you wouldn't be jealous simply because you wouldn't want to be?"

Her hands bunch into fists. "I wouldn't have a right to say either way. I was with Cody. You were with Emma. What's done is done."

"Because I'm not yours, right?" I push, not believing that for a second we were truly done, wouldn't I have detached myself from her?

Her eyes narrow into slits. "Why are you being like this?"

I pull off onto a side road that barely gets any traffic and put the car into park before turning toward her. "Because I want to hear you say it."

She throws her hands up, all but growling out a cool "Say *what?*"

I unbuckle and cup the back of her neck, pulling her toward me until our mouths are centimeters apart. Fingers digging slightly into her neck, I want you to tell me that I'm not yours and *mean* it. Because you would never get jealous over someone else having me if you didn't want me.

You wouldn't be feeding me little half-truths if there wasn't a part of you that wanted to hold on. You talk a lot of talk, baby girl, but what are you

saying?”

. We're A sharp breath escapes her, and I'm all too familiar with the sound  
no holdturned on. Anger be damned, she wants me. Wants this. Her eyes dark  
: Emmaa whole new intent as the top of her tongue slowly drags along her  
let youlip.

“Would you let me touch you this way if I wasn't at least partly yo  
ask, voice dangerously low as I move even closer until the ends of ou  
touch.

fucking Her breathing picks up, getting choppy as she brushes her nose al  
l to telltip of mine as if she wants to make a move but doesn't want to be t  
perfectone to cave.

us and But I wait. I've always been told I'm a patient man—another tra  
nd I'mget from my father. In this moment, I can tell it frustrates the wom  
wiggles her way closer, hands moving to my shoulders and grip  
on herhandful of my jacket.

ying to “You're not being fair,” she whispers, lips ghosting over mine in a  
there touch.

ifusion. My fingers tighten around the nape of her neck, moving upward  
seeingin the strands of her thick hair. “What is fair anyway? Nothing abou  
Are youwe've gone through is. You made sure of that.”

have a She pulls away just enough to look at me. I expect her to say sor  
witty back, but instead her lips press against mine lightly. Once. Twic  
way. Iswipe becomes a little more demanding as she presses into me, her  
my jacket tightening and tugging me forward. When our front  
cond. Iftogether, I can't help but slide my hands down her sides and under he  
to settle on her back.

She stiffens, breaking contact and eyeing me with uncertainty. It  
ie truckmoment before her hands find mine, moving them from her back to h  
.” “I'm a little sore,” she tells me.

I nod. “Okay.”

ntil our “But other places,” she says, lashes fluttering as she grabs one  
say, “Ihands and places it on her thigh, “I'd be okay with.”

ldn't be My heart picks up, along with something else a lot further south.  
e at all.so?”

you that All she does is swallow, moving my hand further upward until it r  
a reallythe apex of her thighs. Her mouth finds mine again, her lips openin

until she teases my tongue and uses my hand to gain friction over the  
l. She's between her legs. I hear the hitch of breath when my fingers press  
en with her, causing her hips to arch up against my touch.

bottom Her eager fingers fumble as she works on undoing the button of her  
starting to wiggle out of the material enough for my hand to have ac  
ours?" I the thin material of her panties.

ir noses She says one word: "Please."

That's all it takes before I spiral.

ong the Like she said, it's an endless cycle.

he first No amount of anger can withstand that one word she whispers.

Taking over the kiss, I use one hand to cup the back of her  
it that I threading my fingers in her hair to keep her face against mine as our  
an who fuse with desperation. My other hand goes to her panties, already da  
oping ame, where I move two of my fingers underneath the cotton to tease her  
needy moan escapes her mouth.

a barely Just as I probe her entrance, she freezes as if she realizes where  
and asks, "What if someone sees?"

to twist There aren't any buildings nearby and rarely ever traffic consider  
ut what is a seasonal road. I sink just the tips of my fingers inside her and le  
her ear, whispering, "Don't worry. I'll tell them we're just friends. A  
nothing I'm not yours. Remember?"

e. Each She gasps when I plunge my fingers farther inside her, making tear  
grip on in her eyes. "H-hurts," she says.

s press I pause at the stuttered word. "Do you want me to stop?"

r jacket One of her arms hooks around my neck until she's hugging us t  
and moving her hips up to ride my hand in the rhythm she wants, giv  
takes at the answer before she says, "No. It's fine."

er hips. "Are you su—"

"Yes," she whispers, kissing me again to stop me from asking.

Not another word is said, just desperate noises in between hungry  
of my and heavy panting. I feel her fingernails dig into the bare sliver of skin  
back of my neck between where my hair ends and my jacket starts.  
"Is that there will be little marks left behind from the bites of pain as her  
builds around my digits. Scissoring my fingers and hooking them  
rests on thighs starting to shake and her teeth biting down onto my bottom lip.  
g mine makes me harder, the growing bulge trapped in my jeans painful as hel

the denim I pay it no attention as a barely audible version of my name comes  
against her mouth or as she grinds on my hand until I can feel the wetness  
my palm, and I make no move to get any relief when she comes, cl  
r jeans, around me.

access to Waiting until she rides it out, I watch a sated expression come across  
face before I carefully pull out my fingers.

“Funny,” I murmur, lifting them to my mouth and slowly moving  
tongue over the arousal left behind. “It sure as fuck tastes like you’re not.”  
A sharp breath leaves her as she watches me, eyelids heavier than lead.  
One of my shoulders lifts. “My mistake.”

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I pay it no attention as a barely audible version of my name comes from her mouth or as she grinds on my hand until I can feel the wetness coating my palm, and I make no move to get any relief when she comes, clenching around me.

Waiting until she rides it out, I watch a sated expression come across her face before I carefully pull out my fingers.

“Funny,” I murmur, lifting them to my mouth and slowly moving my tongue over the arousal left behind. “It sure as fuck tastes like you’re mine.”

A sharp breath leaves her as she watches me, eyelids heavier than before. One of my shoulders lifts. “My mistake.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

# RAINE

THE MONITOR ATTACHED to my finger records my pulse spiking every time I hear footsteps outside the curtain, knowing today is the day I'll know the truth. Whether I want to accept it is a whole different game.

"Relax," Mom tells me, putting her hand on my leg, which hasn't moved since I was told to change into the gown and socks by the sweet nurse. "They're going to take good care of you. You have nothing to worry about."

It's not the procedure I'm worried about. It isn't supposed to take long. I'll be out of here before I know it. What I can't get off my mind is the aftermath.

"What if they tell me worst case?" I ask quietly, staring vulnerably at my mother and hoping she'll be there for me. No theatrics or accusations. Being melodramatic.

Right now, I need my mom.

As a daughter.

She gives me that, curling her hand on my leg in comfort. "I have no doubt that *when* you become a mother someday, you're going to be the best one you can be because you're always looking at the positive things. That goes a long way, Raine."

Hearing her tell me that means more to me than she'll ever know. "Thank you."

The day I got back from lunch with Dad, I walked into the hospital and gave her a tight hug. I could tell she was surprised, but it didn't take long for her to return it, wrapping her arms around me and telling me she loved me.

I know we'll always have our tiffs, but I also know she'll always hug me back when I truly need her there. Same with Dad.

That didn't encourage me to tell her I saw Caleb again. When he came home with me off after our second truck hookup, Mom was locked away in her

room finishing a project for a client and that kept her busy all night.

Which was good.

Because I went to my room and curled up with Sigmund on my bed, feeling where Caleb's fingers had been minutes before and remembering the reasons that we shouldn't have done that.

How am I supposed to push him away if telling him about Cody's impact on how he feels? He still cares. Deeply. The same way I do about him. That's why he's still around, helping me. Making his point clear about how we stand. There's only so much I can do before the truth comes out on its own for all. Because I'd have to tell him if he doesn't run for good.

Staring at Mom's hand, I ask, "Why didn't you tell me about Caleb's dad? The whole town knew, and I felt like such a moron when I got back. I hadn't known he was sick."

She's told me her feelings about my relationship with the Andersens. Even though she never fully admitted it, I think she felt threatened because of how close I was to Caleb's mom. It didn't mean I loved mine less, but I can't blame her why it was hard to witness. Especially whenever I'd escape to their home for dinner or board games or *Family Feud* nights by the television.

There's a momentary pause before she finally sighs and releases her breath. "I didn't tell you because you always want to fix things. And sometimes life can't be fixed no matter how hard you try."

Just as I'm about to reply, I stop myself with the harsh realization that she's right.

I've always tried fixing people. I tried fixing Caleb's pain that day at the hardware store, and look where it got us. Nowhere.

"Make no mistake, Raine," Mom tells me, eyes firmly planted on her face. "I have never disliked Caleb or his family. I know he's a good person, just as his family are good people. I've only wanted you to live your life before settling down with him, or with anybody for that matter. The only reason of you being distracted from all the goals you set out to achieve comes from me."

I have no idea what to say, so I stay quiet.

"You are going to accomplish so many wonderful things because you're strong-willed. I shouldn't have kept anything from you because it was my place. I'm sorry."

Understanding has my head bobbing slowly, even if I wish she

something. But what's done is done.

"Thank you for telling me."

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ring all people appear: one of the anesthesiologists who I've already filled pap  
out for and the man transporting me to the operating room.

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nod to the people waiting for me. "Ready."

Caleb's And two and a half hours later, surrounded by my doctor and  
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my leg. "I'm sorry, Raine," Dr. Ryder tells me softly. "I wish I had bette  
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I barely register my mother's hand on me.

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I can't feel anything but numbness and the cool reality blanket  
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*Not impossible.*

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our life But I refuse to expect too much.

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something. But what's done is done.

"Thank you for telling me."

She stands up and gives me a hug, right as the curtain opens and two people appear: one of the anesthesiologists who I've already filled paperwork out for and the man transporting me to the operating room.

It's him who asks "Are you ready?"

Mom releases me and takes my hand, squeezing it. "You'll be okay. I'll be right here when you wake up."

Swallowing down the anxiety blocking my airway, I force out a shaky nod to the people waiting for me. "Ready."

And two and a half hours later, surrounded by my doctor and mother watching me sip my apple juice as I fully come to, I listen to the words coming from my doctor's mouth.

"...doesn't necessarily mean it's impossible since you haven't actively been trying. But the damage is significant, so it could be very, very difficult for you. Not to mention the health problems you could have in the process."

There's a sliver of optimism in her delivery, but we both know it's slim at best.

"I'm sorry, Raine," Dr. Ryder tells me softly. "I wish I had better news for you."

I barely register my mother's hand on me.

Or the way I stare at the doctor.

I can't feel anything but numbness and the cool reality blanketing my overheated body.

*Not impossible.*

I should be grateful for that.

Miracles have happened before.

But I refuse to expect too much.

How many broken hearts can a person survive before there's nothing left to shatter?

## Chapter Thirty-Three

# CALEB

**B**EA'S IS BUSIER than I expect it to be when I walk in, so it takes a little to get to the counter where Elena and Bea are working around each other to grab drinks and food for people.

“Your usual?” Bea asks, already reaching for a Styrofoam cup. “I don't have your favorite in stock right now, but I have fresh blueberry muffins. I know your parents love.”

I don't bother telling her about Dad's feeding tube because it's not worth the pitiful looks I'd get. “They'd like that.” Especially Mom, who barely eats anything but eggs, microwave meals, or whatever I make extra of and bring home so she can spend as much time with Dad as possible.

She's lost weight.

Worse—she's lost the light in her eyes.

It's barely even there when she sees me.

When I pass Elena my credit card to run, I ask, “Where's Raine? The other guys look like you could use an extra hand.”

The teenager glances at her grandmother briefly before swiping the card through the reader and answering, “She's not working this week.”

It's Bea who elaborates as she puts some of the muffins into a bag. “Raine is recovering from a minor procedure. She'll be back next week. I want to pop in then. I think I put her on the schedule starting Tuesday.”

Procedure? “Like, surgery?”

Bea hums. “Thought you would have known. Heard you two have been pretty cozy.”

My eyes narrow at the suspicious choice of words, especially given what happened the last time I saw Raine. “Do I want to know what you mean?”

A grin curves the older woman's lips as she sets the bag of goods on the counter in front of me. “All I'm saying is that Steve sees all. Artie hired me to help with some construction over at a building he purchased on

Street, and apparently there is quite the view from the side window certain couples park on the street where they think nobody can see them. *Jesus Christ*. First the hardware store camera, now this.

Bea chuckles at my reddening face. "I may not be one to talk, but I certainly had my fun in my younger years, but if you two want privacy might want to choose a better place. One where someone as loud-mouthed Steve can't spy on you. Artie and his entire team knew minutes after you, and you know how fast gossip spreads around here."

Elena turns to her grandma. "That's not fair! I don't even know what happened. Somebody needs to fill me in."

Bea pats Elena's shoulder. "When you're older, dear."

Elena sticks her bottom lip out and passes me my card.

Clearing my throat, I put it away and tuck my wallet in my back pocket. "Thanks. For, uh, the advice. Do you know if Raine is at her place?"

Bea's hands go to her hips. "Where else would she be, boy? Yours."

I can't help but snort at her sass. "Fair point. You got me there."

Bea holds up her hand and grabs the bag again before depositing more pastries inside it. Molasses cookies, I'm sure. "If you're going to see her, the least you can do is give those to her. Tell her I hope she feels better."

Elena smirks at her grandmother's scheming. "Tell Raine I miss you. Okay?"

Sighing, I nod. "You got it."

No point in denying who I'm going to see at this point, especially since we've been in compromising positions.

Bea stops me before I walk out. "Do yourselves a favor and give up whatever is stopping you from being together. Don't you think you owe it to one another to be happy after seeing how miserable you are without each other after all this time?"

I wish it were as easy as that.

"I'll keep that in mind," I murmur, refusing to promise her anything.

Life is already full of disappointment.

I don't want to add to it.

... on the  
... ed him  
... Grove



when KNOCKING ON THE front door of the white house feels just as nerve-racking as it did when I was a teenager. As I wait for somebody to answer, I look out and see the patchy lawn that doesn't seem like anybody took care of because it's the first frost hit.

"Offered to mow it for them," I hear from somewhere nearby. I turn to see an older man by the fence of the property next to the Copelins'. "Sorry, what was that?"

Leon Applebee points his cane to the lawn. "I offered to mow it for them before winter hit. Raine told me they'd handle it. Damn near killed me when she tried to run over the garbage cans when she hit the gas a little too hard on the mower. After that, she seemed too traumatized to try again."

The image makes my lips curl in amusement. "You're Leon, right? Walk over and raise my hand. Raine mentioned the project you helped with. She likes you."

He shakes my hand. "The kid grew on me. Her and her dog, even though she has a licking problem. Surprised to see you here."

My eyes go to the house behind me to make sure nobody came out. Then I turn back to the man currently eyeing me. "I heard Raine mentioned her under the weather, so I brought her something."

His eyes go down to the bag, which I lift for proof. "You got past the door there?"

Lips twitching, I nod. "Yes, sir."

"You gonna share any with me?"

I chuckle and open the bag. "I've got a blueberry muffin up for grabs, but it's a little stale. I won't eat it, so it might as well go to somebody who will."

He reaches in and takes out the food in question before looking back at me. "I was real sad to hear about your father. Anytime my late wife needs something on the honey-do list, I'd make my way down to the hardware store to pick up supplies for it."

Warmth settles into my chest. "We appreciate your business."

His chin dips once. "But I will say, I'm partial to the girl in the house behind you. She's got a real good heart, even if it's a little mischievous sometimes. I'd hate to see anything bad happen to her when she's got so much love to give."

I'm not surprised they formed a bond. Raine has always been good at



king asdoing that with people.

around “I’ve got connections, you know,” he adds, bushy brows arching. “beforepeople who could take care of you if need be. Blueberry muffins c keep you safe for so long, boyo.”

This took a turn. “Good to know...”

to the He gestures toward the house. “Better go. Those girls don’t like to waiting.”

or them When I turn, I see Janet at the door watching me and Leon. I wave e to seeelderly man before walking over to the woman who’s trying not , nearlycompletely uncomfortable with my presence.

e riding “I come in peace,” I offer, lifting the bag of goodies toward her. “E me with Raine’s favorite, and there are extras in there if you want ght?” Ishe’ll see me, that is.”

ped her Raine’s mother glances behind her before stepping outside and s the door. It doesn’t give me much optimism, especially when she cros en if hearsms on her chest and lets out a heavy sigh like her daughter does whe stressed.

e to the “I never did say how sorry I am about what’s going on with your ine wasshe begins, hesitant eyes meeting mine. “I haven’t treated you very fair neither did my husband. *Ex*-husband. You and your family have alwa stries innothing but kind, especially to Raine. I didn’t always like that, bu grateful she’s had you.”

Straightening, I watch as she shifts on her feet, probably fee uncomfortable as I am right now. “My family would do anything for lbs. MyNo matter what happened. I would too.”

She glances down at the ground, but not before I see the slightest g ck up ather eyes that shows how much she cares, even if she has a hard time /ife putit. It’s the first time I’ve seen genuine emotion that isn’t anger from l re storeprogress, even if we’re never going to be close. It means she’s willing

For her daughter.

“She’s vulnerable right now, Caleb” is what I hear next from her t houseI’m trying my best to be there for her, but you may be what she need splacedright now. That’s not easy for me to admit. I’m her mother.”

got so Her glassy eyes move toward mine.

“But you’re her...everything.”

good at I blink.

Repeat those words to myself.

'I know Then blink again.

an only Janet stands taller and rolls her shoulders back before stepping aside  
the door. "I've always been scared that she's going to fall too hard, just  
like I did. But you are not Craig, and she is not me. The last thing I  
be kept for her to struggle with her choices when I played a hand in the one  
made."

off the I have no idea what to say because this is the last thing I expected  
to look pulled up to their house. But nonetheless, a tiny part of me feels like a  
has been lifted.

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For the first time.

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uses her out," she concludes. "Maybe if I had, I would have salvaged my relation  
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Repeat those words to myself.

Then blink again.

Janet stands taller and rolls her shoulders back before stepping aside from the door. “I’ve always been scared that she’s going to fall too hard, too fast like I did. But you are not Craig, and she is not me. The last thing I want is for her to struggle with her choices when I played a hand in the ones she made.”

I have no idea what to say because this is the last thing I expected when I pulled up to their house. But nonetheless, a tiny part of me feels like a weight has been lifted.

Not because I needed her permission.

But because I have it anyway.

For the first time.

“You two have a lot to talk about. If she’s willing to bring it up, hear her out,” she concludes. “Maybe if I had, I would have salvaged my relationship with her a lot sooner than I did.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

# RAINE

I'M LYING IN bed with Sigmund curled beside me when my door cracks. I turn, thinking it's Mom checking on me for the hundredth time. Caleb's head pops in. Panic prickles my limbs as Sigmund instantly drops his tail wagging at the visitor who remains by the door.

"Hey," he greets quietly. "Your mom let me in."

I expected as much since he wouldn't have gotten past the door otherwise. But why is he here? I've seen Skylar and Olive, who came with dog toys and my favorite snacks, and got a phone call from Aunt Sarah checking in after Mom told her about the procedure. I never expected Caleb though. "Hi..."

He smiles at the dog making whining noises, clearly wanting to get in. "He's gotten big, huh? He'll definitely grow into those paws."

Last night when Sigmund was trying to make me feel better, his massive paws stepped on one of my tiny incisions by accident. I could have sworn I felt awful when I cried out because he chose to stay in his open crate instead of the night and keep a watchful eye on me from a distance.

"The vet says he'll be at least sixty pounds when he's fully grown," he says, trying to match his small talk while sitting up and wincing at the pain still lingering in my abdomen.

Caleb watches me prop myself up with a pillow behind my back, gesturing toward Sigmund. "May I?"

All I do is nod, my eyes following him in as he fusses over my little-legged roommate. Sigmund's tail starts wagging harder, shaking not only his entire back end but the bed too.

"You did it," Caleb says, and at first I don't know if he's talking to the dog. Not until his eyes pan over to me. "You've always wanted a corgi. Remember when you went through a corgi phase and would send me a picture of every corgi you'd come across online, trying to get me to buy us one. But

this dude is a pretty solid start. Your first real baby.”

*Baby.* He doesn't see the way my heart tightens and falls to the bottom of my stomach or the way my chest deflates like somebody stuck a needle in my back. Despite how hard I try keeping it in, he can't miss the sob that bubbles up from my wavering lips. It has his hand pausing where it strokes Sigmund's hair. Then the floodgates open, and ugly, desperate tears begin to fall before I can suppress them.

is open. Caleb moves quickly, suddenly squatting beside me. I don't need to look at him to know those intense eyes are trained on me. I can feel them looking at me frantically into my face. “What is it? Are you hurting? Should I get you a doctor? Mom? Do you need medicine?”

warden bearing Tiffany and Caleb The last thing either of us expects is the blurted, hoarse words that spill from my blubbing lips. The truth that can't be contained anymore because I'm eating me up inside. I've got nothing left to fight it.

“I c-can't have any babies.”

attention. Caleb stares.

And stares.

And stares.

; those I tell her the rest And I cry harder for the words that finally relieve the pressure I've been carrying on my conscience for so long.

Then I hear a whispered “What?”

,” I tell her the slight It's only then that I allow myself to peel open my damp eyes and look at the boy whose jaw is slack with confusion, while mine wobble with a saddened relief.

before He's slow to stand. “Raine... What are you talking about?”

y four- only his I sniff back tears, running the back of my hand underneath my nose, struggling to take a deep breath. My lungs hurt yet feel some sort of relief from each breath I manage to take. The hard part is over—the words are said. “You always wanted kids,” I whisper, swiping my hands over my face. It's pointless. The tears keep coming. “You always talked about it. You always talked about how they'd look like and what we'd name them and how we'd raise them together, and I always knew how far away that dream really was.”

a dog. I million I'd say Caleb's blank expression shadows with every word I say, and he remains silent as I blink back more tears and swallow heavily.

*Breathe in.*

ttom of *Breathe out.*

le in it. We lock eyes. “You wanted the one thing I couldn’t give you, so I es fromonly thing I could think of to make sure you’d be happy. One day.”

s back. His head slowly shakes back and forth as if he knows what I’m g re I cansay and refuses to accept it.

“I let you go.”

to look For what feels like forever, there’s nothing but silence. We stare burninganother with two very different emotions on our faces.

et your Mine with reluctant relief.

And his...shock. And something else.

hen he Then he says, “What the fuck?”

down. His hands go to his hair, fingers scraping through the long strand escapebacks up and starts pacing. It’s his go-to when he needs to process som

use it’s Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Even Sigmund watches, his head moving to follow Caleb’s every s

“Are you telling me that you broke up with me because of this?” I

stopping to turn to me. There’s a tiny muscle in his temple that’s tw right now.

ve been “Yes.”

More twitching.

“How do you even know that you can’t have kids? I don’t get it.”

look at *Tell him*, the voice inside me encourages.

es with There’s no going back from it.

My hands shake as I reach for Sigmund, touching his side grounded. “You’ll hate me,” I tell him.

ose and The question he asks next is delivered in a cool tone. “Wasn’t t of easeplan all along? Why hold back now?”

are out. He’s always been too smart for his own good, which is why I e to drypointless. It’s too tiring to keep it all straight. The half-truths and wh it whatand partial recognitions of reality.

e them It’s all or nothing.

I give it all.

remains And I’ll get nothing.

Another cycle.

Endless and ugly.

So I tell him. Everything.

did the All the dirty details.

The sleepless nights.

going to The fear of realization when I found out I'd been pregnant with baby and an entirely new fear when they'd seen all those cysts on my that spread over the years.

at one I tell Caleb every little doubt that crept into my mind. Could I ma happy if we couldn't have kids? Would he be angry? Resentful? Sad? we make it forever after so many promises weren't met?

Deep down, I want to believe we could.

But sometimes you have to sacrifice the comfortable things in life ls as he good things. It's not always mutually exclusive. I would have preferred ething. think the worst of me after telling him about Cody, so I didn't let myse there was a chance at a future for us.

Because Caleb was always a comfortable thing.

step. Wonderful. Loving. Attentive.

he asks, We were good together, but that didn't mean we always wo ritching Nothing is guaranteed in life. So you have to figure out what's keeping, losing, and letting go of for the bigger picture. It wasn't j masterpiece that I was painting. It was Caleb's too.

"I want you to know how sorry I am for everything I did. All the put you through were always meant for the best. It wasn't that I thoug to lose you to find me. It was the other way around. I needed to know be happy, even if that meant seeing you build everything we talked to feel with somebody else. I'm so sorry, Caleb. You've gone through a lot th and you didn't deserve it."

that the I'm greeted by the thickest silence we've ever shared between u not even blinking.

ying is This is why I didn't want to tell him. Because every wave of emo uite lie his face is clear. Because there's no going back. No more shielding hi anything. No more protection from what fate dealt us.

Eventually, his fists tighten at his sides.

"I can't..." He shakes his head, turning around and cursing.

There's barely any evidence of him in this room because I tucked things that reminded me of him into a box in the closet. Safe, for n

only when I want to torture myself. And I do. Often. But as he looks at me, he must see how much he's been erased from the life I've lived since the breakup.

Caleb abruptly swings around, eyes narrowing as they land on me. "Cody's fucking *dare* you."

My ovaries My eyes widen.

"How *dare* you make that decision for me," he seethes, fists clenched. Like him tightly they turn white. He doesn't move closer to me or step away. "You had no right to assume I couldn't handle the truth. Do you honestly think I needed your help? That you made things *easier*?"

Jaw quivering, I shake my head. "Cal—" "No." He jabs a finger at me. "You don't get to say anything else. You've done enough. All this time, Raine. *All this time*." More cursing, hair tugging, and pacing.

Sigmund is standing, but his tail isn't wagging anymore. It's tucked under his legs as he watches Caleb suspiciously, stiff and protective as if he can sense the tension in the room.

When Caleb finally turns to me again, I don't expect his red-rimmed, tear-worthglassy eyes full of angry tears. "You had no right," he repeats, voice broken and just my with raspiness.

"I really thought I was doing the right thing," I tell him. "I thought I couldn't have kids—"

"This isn't about the goddamn kids, Raine!" he barks, veins popping out of your'dhis neck. He grips his hair and stares at me through his tear-stricken eyes. "I needed you. And you weren't there."

The second those broken words are out, what's left of my heart shatters.

So this time I don't bother saying anything. An apology won't do anything. He's this point.

*I needed you.*

*I needed you.*

*I needed you.*

"I can't do this," Caleb says. He goes to my bedroom door, gives me a last look as if he's trying to figure out what's real and what's not, and then walks out.

The front door opens.

Slams closed.



around, Silence.

nce the Mom appears at the doorway. She doesn't say a word when she w  
or when she gets onto the bed and carefully pulls me into her side.

. "How It isn't until I rest my head on her shoulder and let my damp che  
into her shirt that she brushes her long fingers in my hair and tells  
voice uncharacteristically soft, "I know I haven't made things easy f  
hing sobut you could have told me. If I'd known what happened all those yea  
?ou hadI could have helped you. I know it wouldn't have changed what yo  
nk youthrough, but it would have changed how you coped with it. I..." She  
deep breath, pausing her comforting strokes. "I failed you in so many  
didn't I?"

You've Squeezing my eyes closed, I whisper, "I failed myself."

ugging, Mom is quiet for a long stretch of time before her fingers start  
again. "You've done far better at life than I have, Raine. Despite  
d underchallenges you've faced, especially on your own. I'd hardly say  
he canfailing."

face or  
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nd then

Silence.

Mom appears at the doorway. She doesn't say a word when she walks in or when she gets onto the bed and carefully pulls me into her side.

It isn't until I rest my head on her shoulder and let my damp cheek soak into her shirt that she brushes her long fingers in my hair and tells me, her voice uncharacteristically soft, "I know I haven't made things easy for you, but you could have told me. If I'd known what happened all those years ago, I could have helped you. I know it wouldn't have changed what you went through, but it would have changed how you coped with it. I..." She takes a deep breath, pausing her comforting strokes. "I failed you in so many ways, didn't I?"

Squeezing my eyes closed, I whisper, "I failed myself."

Mom is quiet for a long stretch of time before her fingers start moving again. "You've done far better at life than I have, Raine. Despite all the challenges you've faced, especially on your own. I'd hardly say that's failing."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

# CALEB

MOM STARTLES WHEN I slam the front door closed and storm in. She and Dad are both awake and gawking at me in the living room as I enter, shake my head, and walk into the kitchen.

No words can describe what I'm feeling right now. I don't know how to ever find the right way to express everything swirling in my head.

"Honey?" Mom says cautiously, a hand falling onto my back. I'm leaning over the counter, gripping the edges until my fingers hurt. "Caleb happened?"

Frustration still seeps into every crevice it can as I look over my shoulder at her. "Raine."

It's the only thing I can get out.

One word.

One name.

Confusion swirls on Mom's face. "I'm going to need more than that. What happened between you and Raine?"

"She—" My hoarse voice is cut off with frustration, forcing me to clear my throat and stand taller until Mom's hand falls from my back. I take a breath. "She lied over and over again. And for fucking what? It could have been different. It would have been fine."

Mom is shaking her head and trying to piece together what I'm telling her when Dad calls out my name.

I look to Mom, wipe my face with my hands, and watch her nod as she guides me into the living room again.

He says those three damn words that have me dropping onto the floor with my palms on my wet face. "Talk to me."

If anybody has a right to be mad at the world, it's the man waiting for me. If there's anyone who needs to be comforted right now, it's the man who reaches over and grabs ahold of my hand. But like always, he's

everything he has left to me.

So I let it all out.

Every raw admission.

Every hard reality.

Every horrible emotion.

Because I'm done holding it back.

Physically, mentally, and emotionally done.

nd Dad "She *gave up* on us," I whisper, staring helplessly at my father.  
ake my had just told me the truth, we could have figured it out. But she chose  
even try."

v if I'll I swipe furiously at my cheeks, letting Dad's hand fall to the cou  
All while he watches me with knowing eyes. Studying. Waiting for  
take a few deep breaths and calm down.

leaning "Let me ask you something," he prompts, wincing as he reposition  
, what chair. "If you got married to Raine, committed to one another for a l  
no matter the circumstances, without the knowledge you have now,  
houlder you care if you later learned you couldn't have kids? Would that info  
upset you if you struggled with it?"

I blink slowly. "How could you ask that?" How could *Raine* assu  
be a dickhead about something she had no control over?

an that. Dad gives me a look. "Son, Raine doesn't have a malicious bone  
body. If she thought breaking up with you was for the best, then ther  
logical reason for it."

to clear There it is again. Logic. Just because something is logical doesn't  
: a deep has to make sense. "Do I want children? Yeah. Christ, Dad. You kno  
ld have How long have I said I wanted somebody to pass along the store to? T  
ling her them there like you did with me?" I stand, riled up again. "Does tha  
me an asshole or something?"

od and "Language," Dad says, coughing. One of his shaky hands goes  
chest, rubbing it until he catches his breath. "Don't you think all that  
: couch what contributed to her decision?"

to help Standing taller, my brows pinch at the question. "I don't understan  
person Mom steps in from where she's been standing silently at the door  
giving the room. "Baby boy, Raine knows how much you want to be a  
for a second she was going to get in the way of that, she was going

herself out of the equation. She did what she thought was best. I'm not  
I condone the way she hurt you, but I can see where she was coming fr

Nostrils flaring, I look away from them and swipe my tongue al  
dry lips. Sniffing back the tears prickling my eyes, I roll my shoulde  
and let out a harsh breath. "Best for who? Because as far as I'm con  
she did it selfishly."

Dad's scoff has my eyes dropping to him in confusion. "I have  
"If she heard you spout more bullshit than I did just now. Almost as much a  
e not to you tried convincing yourself you stopped loving her."

Mom sighs. "Richard."

ch arm. Dad shakes his head. "No, Denise. You and I both know those t  
r me to meant to be together and too goddamn stubborn to get past shit that's  
their control. You have someone who sacrificed her happiness for you  
s in the whether that was misplaced or not. That's anything but selfish."

lifetime I let that sink in.

would "She never liked football," he tells me.

mation My brow furrows. "What?"

"All those games she went to—" He has to stop himself to cou  
me I'd catch his breath. "I know she didn't enjoy them. But she went for you  
single time."

e in her Mom's head bobs in agreement. "Actions always speak loud  
e was a words, sweetie. There was so much you both did for each other th  
meant to enhance each other's lives. Look at how often she'd end  
mean it competitive game nights. She loved being here because you were h  
w I do. because she liked any of the board games we were playing."

To raise Raine never said one way or another.

it make Dad dips his chin. "That girl would clearly do anything for you. Yo  
to figure out if that's enough to get past this or if it's the reason to let  
s to his for good. But you cannot keep stepping on the line. One of you n  
t talk is make the final decision."

*The final decision.*

d." Guilt sinks into my stomach for accusing her of thinking only of  
way of when they're making a good point. We always did what I wanted, and  
father. thought twice about it because half of the time it was Raine's suggestic

thought But does that mean I can forgive her right now? "I wouldn't have  
to take I tell my parents quietly. "About the kids."

t saying      Their silence shows their doubt.  
om.”      “I *wouldn't*,” I press. “I’d be...sad. But I’d have her. That’s all  
ong myreally wanted.” The second that absorbs, my chest tightens.

rs back      It was always about Raine.

cerned,      Not the other shit.

                The things we did.

e never      The places we went.

is when      It was always fun because she was with me, right there by my side.

                Dad says, “Families come in all different forms. You never know  
                you’re going to get in life. All you could ask for is one full of love  
two areanything, this proves you’ll have a lifetime worth of it from that girl  
s out ofwalked out on today.”

rs, kid,      Mom comes over and sits on the arm of Dad’s chair, putting her hand  
                around his shoulders and smiling at me. “I understand why you’re  
                this,” she says softly. “But do you want this to be the reason you  
reconcile?”

                Dropping back down onto the couch, I brush a palm down my face  
igh andlooking to my parents. “At what price though?”

. Every      Dad coughs again.

                Mom smiles sadly and asks one simple question. “Can you really  
er thanprice on love?”

at was      When Dad moves his hand away from his mouth, there’s bright red  
ure ourcovering his skin.

ere, not      Mom stares at Dad.

                I stare at Mom.

                And Dad stares at his hand.

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on.

cared,”

Their silence shows their doubt.

“I *wouldn't*,” I press. “I’d be...sad. But I’d have her. That’s all I ever really wanted.” The second that absorbs, my chest tightens.

It was always about Raine.

Not the other shit.

The things we did.

The places we went.

It was always fun because she was with me, right there by my side.

Dad says, “Families come in all different forms. You never know what you’re going to get in life. All you could ask for is one full of love. If anything, this proves you’ll have a lifetime worth of it from that girl you walked out on today.”

Mom comes over and sits on the arm of Dad’s chair, putting her arm around his shoulders and smiling at me. “I understand why you’re hurt by this,” she says softly. “But do you want this to be the reason you can’t reconcile?”

Dropping back down onto the couch, I brush a palm down my face before looking to my parents. “At what price though?”

Dad coughs again.

Mom smiles sadly and asks one simple question. “Can you really put a price on love?”

When Dad moves his hand away from his mouth, there’s bright red blood covering his skin.

Mom stares at Dad.

I stare at Mom.

And Dad stares at his hand.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

# RAINE

WHEN I SEE Leon walk into Bea's with a young, brunette woman beside him, I smile for the first time in nearly two weeks. Ever since the falling-out with Caleb, I've felt a hole in my chest that nothing seems to mend. Not Sigmund's warm cuddles, the Milk Duds Dad has been sending me, or the cooking class Mom signed us up for together that starts right before the beginning of spring semester. I take each day as it comes and do my best to distract myself from feeling sorry over the choices I've made.

Christmas is in a matter of days, and I don't have the same traditions as most people typically do. Our tree is up but bare of decorations, and the only shopping I did consisted of gift certificates that I've tucked in holiday cards because that was the easiest route to take.

My neighbor snorts in amusement when he stops at the counter to look at the antlers that Elena made me wear. They have bells on them and give me a headache the longer they rattle, but the sassy teenager insisted we get into the holiday spirit with antlers, ugly sweaters, and Christmas music playing all day long.

"Nice antlers, kid," Leon muses, causing the woman beside him to look at me. I recognize her from the pictures he's shown me in the albums he'd put up when I was over. "This is my daughter, Jenna. Figured it was about time you and I met two of you met."

She reaches her hand out first, which I meet halfway over the counter. "I've heard a lot about you, Raine. Anybody who can handle this kind of bastard has my respect."

I grin at the man in question. "I like her, Leon."

The old man rolls his eyes. "Of course you do." He gestures toward the chalkboard with a seasonal special written on it. "Don't suppose you still have some of the warm cider left, do you?"

"Bea bought more yesterday. Two cups?"



Jenna holds out a credit card before Leon can reach for his tattered “And I’d love it if you could add two apple fritters for here. Dad hasn’t been able to stop raving about them for months, so it’s time I tried one.”

I accept the card. “No problem.”

Leon grabs his wallet, which is on its last legs, and pulls out a five-dollar bill to stick into the tip jar.

“You really need a new wallet,” I tell him, passing his daughter’s credit card back and waiting for the receipt to print.

He scoffs. “There’s nothing wrong with this one. Nothing a little duct tape can’t fix.”

Jenna rolls her eyes. “You’re getting a new one for Christmas. It’s not even a year old, or the tape is on the stocking already. Act surprised.”

Laughing lightly, I grab two cups and start on their order. “Are you here for the best to do holiday shopping or are you finished?”

“We’re almost done,” she tells me. “Dad wanted help getting some things for the kids, so they’re with their father for the day being loaded up on the bus, and God only knows what else.”

Despite the wary look Leon gives me, I don’t feel any sadness about her children. If anything, it makes me happy that he’s doing something perfect for them. I guess that’s what happens when you realize nothing is going to change about your situation.

It takes too much energy being angry, so you might as well find things in life to lift your spirits.

“I bet they’re excited for Christmas,” I reply, passing her the cups and going toward the display case for the fritters. “I remember how much I loved this time of year when I was little. Everything was so…”

“Magical,” Jenna finishes for me with a warm smile.

I return the smile easily before transferring the fritters into the heating oven to warm.

Leon clears his throat, shifting his cane and looking behind him at the tables. “You wouldn’t happen to have a few minutes to sit down, would you?”

Elena is in the back helping Bea, but things are slow enough for me to break. “That shouldn’t be a problem. Is everything okay?”

He nods. “As good as it can be. I just think it’d be great if you could have had a chance to sit down and chat a bit while she’s in town.”

wallet. I put their fritters on plates and set them down in front of them. ‘I’ll beentable, and I’ll meet you over there in a minute. I’m going to get a drink. I’ll let them know I’m taking five.’”

Wiping my hands off on my apron, I untie it and pop my head in the back door. “Lena, can you take over the counter for a few minutes? Leon is with his daughter, so I’m going to sit with them.”

Bea waves her granddaughter off. “Go on. I’ve got this covered for now.” After pouring myself a glass of water, I head to the back and pull up the ductchair between Leon and Jenna.

Jenna starts the conversation. “I read the paper that Dad helped you write. It’s really good. Reading that stuff about him and Mom brought up so many good memories from when I was little.” She gives Leon a nostalgic smile. “I can see his lips slowly curling to return. “It made me think about how grateful I am to have them as parents.”

Hearing her say that makes me happy, knowing that there were no sugarpatches along the way for the three of them. “I wish I could have gotten to know Annemarie. She seems like she would’ve been the perfect mother for you two.”

A fondness warms Leon’s face at the sentiment that I know to be true. “I’m finding out more about her as I read.”

Jenna turns to me. “I actually wanted to talk to you about some of the things you know about Mom’s fertility issues. He mentioned that she understood on a personal level, and reading that paper made me think about how everything my mother would have loved to do before she passed away. Did Dad ever tell you she was into charity work and volunteering?”

I shake my head, racking my brain for a time that might have come up. “We didn’t really discuss that, but I’m not surprised to hear it. That sounds like something she’d do.”

Jenna beams. “Exactly. Which is why I think it’d be a neat idea to have something in her name. Like some sort of charity event or work that helps women somehow.”

“Are you thinking a donation in her name, or something big?” I ask, wouldquestion, leaning back in my chair. I’ve definitely seen people do that for loved ones, but I’ve never researched it before.

Leon sets down his cider. “Annemarie was someone who’d want to help big or go home. She had a big heart. The more she could help, the happier she was.”

Jenna nods. “I don’t know what your experience is with repro

‘Grab a health. I know you’re not in school for anything like that, but you do think and help people. I figured the best way to mesh the best of both worlds was you how to start. Maybe see if you had any ideas.’

While I didn’t know Annemarie personally, I can guess her problems are here struggles. I haven’t thought about being an advocate for reproductive health but I’m sure it’s something she would have partnered with me on if she was around now.”

Something she would have started.

Go big or go home.

“I’d have to look into it,” I start, looking between the two of them. I think somebody like Annemarie would want to help as many people as possible that could. Educating. Raising money for organizations that would help universal reproductive health to reach the audience who needed it.

Something like that.”

Leon’s eyes lighten the same way Jenna’s do. Even if they’re not often related, their expressions are uncanny. A true case of nature versus nurture.”

Everything Leon and Annemarie did for her is evident in the way she looks at herself. If I can see it, so can anybody else.

Annemarie is the perfect spokesperson for the people who need help. That’s your story.

People like me.

The ones who need hope.

“You could call it the Annemarie Project,” I suggest, toying with my water glass.

Maybe if I’d had that kind of resource when I first found out about my diagnosis, I wouldn’t have been so scared. So destructive. I’d like to think I would have told my parents and Caleb what was going on instead of that worst-case scenario. If there are women out there who can be helped when they make the same choices as me, they’d have a better chance at being happier with themselves in the long run.

Jenna and Leon share a look, silently communicating through the silence. When they turn back to me, their smiles say it all.

“We could call it that,” Jenna corrects.

I swallow, knowing I already have a lot on my plate but also something tug in my chest that encourages me to take this opportunity.

Annemarie isn’t here to share her story.

want to But I am.

s to ask I have nothing left to lose anymore, so maybe it's time to finally open up.  
"I'm in," I tell them, giving them a watery smile at the release of emotion suddenly crashing through the barrier I've kept it behind.

health, Long after I've said my goodbyes to them and they've left, I feel the warmth take over the emptiness of my body. It lights up the part of me that has been anything but for a while now, and I wonder if it's the one I've been missing out on.

Hope.

. "But I As if the universe knows how badly I need it, another spark of contentment travels through me when I walk up to my house after work to see something sitting on the front step.

t most. A little stuffed polar bear holding a heart that says two words. *I love me.*

t blood It reminds me of the others I have stashed in my bedroom closet.

nurture. I freeze when I hear "I'm still upset you didn't trust me enough to be honest."

er kindhis hands tucked into his jacket pockets.

Throat thickening as I swallow, I try to gather my thoughts around something. The only thing I can muster is "I understand."

Caleb's eyes move to the ground before heaving out a sigh. "I don't know what to do this anymore, Raine."

Those words are a kick to the gut, causing my fingers to clench around the bear. He's officially ending it with me. In person. Right here.

think I I guess I can't blame him. Isn't this what I was trying to get him to think whole time? Hate me? Move on from me?

l before Instead of giving me the final send-off, he says, "I can't keep acting like this is over when we both know it's not. I need you to be honest with me. Do you still love me? Because I never stopped loving you, no matter how hard I tried. It killed me. Every day. Every thought of you living without me. No matter what you said, I was still in it. And I need to know if you feel the same."

feeling Gaping at him, I loosen my hold on the bear and stand taller. "Even everything that happened, you still love me?"

He doesn't answer.

He's waiting for mine.

Open up. Shakily, I nod. "I love you."

Emotion His dark eyes glisten, as if he's relieved by the response he was  
he'd get. "Okay. Good." He nods, looking away for a second before t  
feel a deep breath. "Good."

My chest My eyes go to the bear again. "Why on earth would I need to  
be thing you? It's me who needs to earn *your* forgiveness."

Fingertips brushing over the stitched words that look handmade, I  
him as he walks over to me and stops a few feet away. "I asked your m  
mark of teach me how to sew. It's not very good..." His eyes are on the bea  
ork and it's legible. She fixed a couple of the letters for me so you could tell  
said."

Forgive My mother taught him how to sew? "You did this for me?"

"I bought the bear," he admits. "I didn't have that much time  
hands to go all out. Just did the message. Pretty sure your mom wa  
h to bewring my neck whenever I'd mess up. Remember the bears I used  
you?"

Heb with Of course I do. "I remember everything."

My eyes go back down to the bear, wondering when Mom wou  
nd say had time to teach him anything. I'm surprised she didn't say anything  
either.

I't want Caleb pulls me from the thought. "I was a jackass to you before.  
why I want you to forgive me. It was a lot to take in, and I know I  
around handle it well. I'm not going to lie, Raine. That shit is going to take  
time to get over. Because we could have avoided so much pain if you  
do the *told* me what was going on. From the day you got back that summer a  
years ago."

ing like I know that now—know that none of this was worth it. "I'm sorry."

me. Do His head moves back and forth. "I don't want your apology. I'  
v damn with apologies. All I want is to fix it. Better it. No more lies from r  
g a life We won't make it if something like this happens again."

know if He's right. There'd be no trust, no foundation, if we came back  
place.

"After "I promise," I whisper. "No more lies."

Caleb closes the distance between us, cupping the back of my he  
pulling me into his chest. I feel his lips against the top of my head

shuddering breath release against my hair. He holds me tight, crush  
bear between us like he's afraid to let go.

n't sure     Against my hair, he muffles, "I fucking missed you."

aking a     I manage to wrap an arm around his waist and hug him back for t  
time. "I missed you too. Every day."

forgive     If it's possible, his grip tightens. "Dad wants to see you. If you're  
it. You can bring Sigmund. You know nobody would mind."

peek at     His dad? "Are you sure?"

nom to     Caleb nods, his chin brushing the crown of my head. "He doesn  
ir. "Butmuch time, Raine. It's now or never. My parents never stopped lovin  
what itNone of us did."

I clench my eyes closed to fight off the tears. I haven't seen his da  
graduation, but I've heard that isn't the man who exists anymore. I  
on myready for it, but I have no choice but to be. For him.

nted to     For Caleb.

l to get     For Denise.

For *me*.

"Okay."

ld have  
about it

That's  
I didn't  
a long  
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”

m done  
ow on.

to this

ead and  
and his

shuddering breath release against my hair. He holds me tight, crushing the bear between us like he's afraid to let go.

Against my hair, he muffles, "I fucking missed you."

I manage to wrap an arm around his waist and hug him back for the first time. "I missed you too. Every day."

If it's possible, his grip tightens. "Dad wants to see you. If you're up for it. You can bring Sigmund. You know nobody would mind."

His dad? "Are you sure?"

Caleb nods, his chin brushing the crown of my head. "He doesn't have much time, Raine. It's now or never. My parents never stopped loving you. None of us did."

I clench my eyes closed to fight off the tears. I haven't seen his dad since graduation, but I've heard that isn't the man who exists anymore. I'm not ready for it, but I have no choice but to be. For him.

For Caleb.

For Denise.

For *me*.

"Okay."

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

# CALEB

I DON'T KNOW what Dad says to Raine, but after nearly forty minutes in the room alone together, talking in mumbled tones, she bends down to give me a peck on the cheek and a hug that he feebly returns.

More words are whispered.

More nodding.

Then, Raine stands up and smiles down at the man who enters the room coughing fit until the nurses surround him.

Mom's hand finds my back, brushing it once before walking into the living room to be with Dad.

When Raine approaches me, studying my parents at the doorway into the room, she tucks herself against my front for a hug. "What did he say to you?" I ask curiously.

I hear a soft laugh that gently shakes her body, causing me to look up at her. She pulls back enough to meet my eyes, hers light with humor. She smiles up at me. "He told me if I ever break your heart again, he'd come back and haunt me for the rest of my life."

I blink.

Then blink again.

Then I start laughing until she joins in.

It's only after I shake my head and pull her back into me for another moment that I look over her head to see my parents staring at me with their peaceful smiles on their faces.

They look happy.

Despite everything, they can still smile.

"Hey, Caleb?" Raine peeks up at me, resting her chin on my chest. "I'm wondering..."

I look down and wait.

"Do you want to go get some chicken?"



Snorting, I playfully poke her side. "I'm never going to live that  
am I?"

She shakes her head. "Nope."

I hook an arm around her shoulder and turn to my parents. "We'r  
to grab dinner. Want us to bring you guys back anything?"

They both shake their heads.

Dad says, "Go be with your girl, kid. I'll see you when you get hor

es in a  
e him a  
It's a promise I hope he holds on to.

another

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7 of the  
o you?"

k down  
r as she  
ne back

her hug  
e same

. "I was

Snorting, I playfully poke her side. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

She shakes her head. “Nope.”

I hook an arm around her shoulder and turn to my parents. “We’re going to grab dinner. Want us to bring you guys back anything?”

They both shake their heads.

Dad says, “Go be with your girl, kid. I’ll see you when you get home.”

It’s a promise I hope he holds on to.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

# CALEB

**T**HAT NIGHT, DAD passes away in his sleep.

It's a somber moment.

Silent.

Inevitable.

My mother lets out a choked sob.

She wraps me in her arms as the nurses surround his unmoving body. "I waited to make sure you were going to be okay. And that...that had to be enough."

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

# CALEB

**T**HAT NIGHT, DAD passes away in his sleep.

It's a somber moment.

Silent.

Inevitable.

My mother lets out a choked sob.

She wraps me in her arms as the nurses surround his unmoving body. “He waited to make sure you were going to be okay. And that...that has to be enough.”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

# CALEB

DAD'S SECOND FAVORITE holiday was New Year's because it meant new beginnings. "It doesn't matter what happened in the past because this is a new chapter of life, son," he'd always say when the countdown began.

Two arms wrap around me from behind, stirring me from the contest I'm having with the stars. "I thought I'd find you out here," she says quietly. I feel her forehead rest between my shoulder blades before her arms tighten around me briefly in a hug before loosening. Walking on the other side, she tugs on her jacket and leans against the railing. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you this week? I know your mom is busy with the stone carvers to get the gravestone finished and delivered to the cemetery, so if you need me to come with you to help with the arrangements, I will."

Dad didn't want a funeral. He said he wanted people to celebrate his life, not waste it mourning the end of his. Apparently, he and Mom had an in-depth conversation about it a month or so ago. "He knew," Mom told me the night he was taken out of the house. "He knew his time was up but he wanted to stay just a little bit longer. For you and Raine."

Tears burn the backs of my eyes as I clear my throat and try to fight them off. The bitter air doesn't help any. Between the nip of chill against my face and the way the wind clings to the tears threatening to spill, it makes my vision even blurrier as I attempt to keep it together.

"You hate missing school," I reply, knowing she's mapped out the remainder of her degree. Every course and clinical hour is color-coded on her calendar. I don't want to put her behind.

Raine looks from the sky to me. "I'd rather be there for you right now than already emailed my professors saying I'll be out for a few days."

My heart clenches. "You don't have to do that for me."

Her brown eyes sadden. "Didn't you once tell me that you'd do a

for me?”

I nod, watching her closely when those lips curl softly upward corners.

“Then what makes you think it’s any different for me? We’re a Caleb. I’m going to be there for you because I wasn’t when you needed be before. I’m going to make that up to you every single day to prove this.”

it fresh “What about what you need?” I ask.

is your Her hand rubs my arm slowly. “This isn’t about me, Caleb. Taking or two off classes isn’t going to kill me.”

staring I’m not surprised that’s her answer.

’ Raine Scrubbing my face, I lean against the railing next to her. “Did you ore her that my favorite thing to do was feed you?”

to my Head tilting, her hand stills on my arm before lowering to her side ure you didn’t know that.”

vorking I let loose a breath that eases some of the tightness in my lungs. ‘ seem small, but it made me feel good to know I could provide for you l to the way possible. My dad was the same way with my mom. I bet your o e other the same way when he was able to bring something to the table for y your mother.”

te their Raine glances down at the top of the railing. “I never really thought om had it like that, I guess. Mom and I both got used to letting the men in o om told handle that stuff.”

, but he “Because we *wanted* to,” I tell her. “My dad loved cleaning, do igh them laundry, cooking dinner, anything he could for my mom. Because the ny face each other, and he knew it made her happy to have someone dote on h kes my in a while. It’s no different from when Mom made Dad a homecooke on the days he had long shifts at the store and came home exhausted.”

out the For a while, she doesn’t say anything. “I always loved their love.”

d in her I look over at her.

now. I “You were right before. A lot could have been solved if we’d only about it. I shut too many things down because it’s what I’m used to other people do. Mom. Dad. My aunt. Their version of communicati always fighting until somebody gave up trying.”

nything There are obvious similarities between her and her mother that point out because there’s no reason to. She knows where she went wro

I'm determined to make sure we don't go back to that place.

I at the "We're not your parents," I remind her.

She nods. "I know." Holding up her hand, she says, "I have something for you. Wait here."

I'd come to Raine disappears into the apartment. Not even a minute later I'm inreappears in the doorway holding a container of something in her hands. "It's not going to be as good as the cake your mom makes, but I tried my best. Your mom helped me with it. Don't worry. She didn't spit in it or anything. It's a day obviously over her tiff with us. I guess asking her for help winning really got her to realize we're the endgame."

That makes me smile. Knowing her mother approves is the kind of reassurance I need because I know how much her family's approval means to her.

"No. I "There's also soup in the fridge that I brought over. Leon helped me make it. It was his wife's recipe."

"It may All I can do is stare at the dessert container that she passes me. She'll be in any time to make this for me. With her mother. Who may or may not. My dad felt spit in it for hurting her daughter's feelings when she told me not to. I'll take you and the chance.

Raine steps closer. "It's officially after midnight. Happy birthday, and I wish your dad could be here to celebrate with us."

My life Taking a deep breath, I gently set the container down beside us and pull her in for a frontal hug, resting my chin against the top of her head. "The nurses said he was the strongest patient they'd ever had. Nobody with that same form of cancer as him survives this long. Not even when they do the treatment to slow the progression of it."

My dad meal Her arms go back around my waist. "I'm not surprised. Your father was always one of the strongest people I met."

"One of?" I question, staring at the birthday cake she made me.

I hear her take a soft breath before nuzzling closer to me. I try to keep myself as warm as possible when the chilly breeze starts blowing a little harder. My hearing voice is muffled when she replies, "I always considered you to be the strongest, so it makes sense. He raised you to be."

Closing my eyes, I move my fingers to the back of her head and I won't brush them through her hair. I feel her cheek press against my chest and stand like this for a while longer.

Moving her hat farther down so it's covering the tops of her ears, I press a light kiss against her head and say, "Friend had a nice ring for but I've always preferred calling you mine. Just about ended me when we weren't."

er, she She's quiet for a long time, and I wonder what's on her mind. Eventually. "It's I feel something press against the spot just above my heart.

est. My Her lips.

}. She's "I missed the sound of that too," she admits.

ne over That's when Dad's words echo in my head for a second time tonight. *doesn't matter what happened in the past because this is your new chance at life, son.*"

means to While I never wanted to live a chapter of my life without my father, it makes me want to be the best one I possibly can be to my own kid so I can spend as much time with them as I can. No matter how we have it, so I can give them even a fraction of the time I got when I was growing up.

ie spent As if she knows what I'm thinking, Raine places one of her hands on my forehead. "It's going to be okay eventually. Maybe not right now, but someday I'd take it." *Someday.*

I'd like to think that someday, everything will make sense. "Someday," Caleb sounds like a promise from her that I have every intention of holding her. It means I still get to have her in my life. For now, I'll take the little moments and pull them close because those will build into much bigger ones.

d. "The I find myself smiling in the dark.

with the *Someday.*

hey get "I like the sound of that," I tell her, tipping her chin up so she's looking at me.

er was After watching each other for a few seconds, she closes the distance. Her kiss is slow, patient. Tender. So are the little touches—a stroke of her hand against my beating heart, fingernails lazily dancing over my collarbone, her fingers curling over my shoulder and squeezing.

ler. Her We move inside to the bedroom, taking our time peeling each other's layers off until there's nothing between us at all.

I lay her down carefully, brushing loose hair away from her face. "You sure?"

t as we She places her hand on top of the one I have cupping her cheek. "That's the one word that could have changed our story a long time ago."



ldening It fuels the fire that ignites under my skin, coaxing every flick  
ng to it, finger and hitch of breath until Raine's back arches. Webbing her  
ien youthrough my hair as I kiss down her body, she tugs the moment my  
meets the spot between her legs.

ntually, Every sound I draw from her gets me harder until she's pawing  
shoulders to pull me up. Climbing up her body, I look down from v  
hover over her and say, "From now on, no matter what, it's *us*. We're  
together. Hear me?"

ght. "It She nods. "I hear you."

apter of I press a kiss against the crook of her neck and ease myself insi  
"Do you *feel* me?"

dad, it Her fingernails dig into my shoulders as her legs wrap around my v  
meday, welcome me deeper. "Y-yes, I feel you."

things I Another kiss against her throat as I start moving. She meets n  
every time I slide inside, causing me to swallow a groan.

ds over When I meet her eyes again, I say, "Us."

eday." She stares, her hand cupping the back of my neck as we bring eac  
closer to the edge, and repeats, "Us."

meday" That's all it takes before I let go, knowing we're finally on the sam  
ier to if Together. Us against the world, as it always should have been.

oments From the other side of the closed door, we hear a loud bark that br  
the moment.

Snorting, I drop my forehead against Raine's. "And Si  
apparently."

oking at She cracks a smile. "We're sort of a package deal."

ce. The

er hand

ne, and

IN THE FOLLOWING days, it seems like things are starting to go back to  
Or whatever my new version of normal is without Dad. I miss him ev  
of our but remember he's looking after me and everything I do still. Even if I  
here.

e. "Are

Which makes today frustrating, because even though he's remin  
it's okay not to have it together all the time, I still want to make him pr

hen she

"Yes."

Staring at the bill in my hand, I let out a frustrated sigh before droj



of my onto the pile of other mail with red lettering on it that nobody wants to  
fingerstry counting my blessings that not all of them are for the store—some  
mouthschool. Not that getting anything from the financial aid office is neces  
good thing. But it makes the choice I've made about taking a brea  
g at myschool that much smarter.

where I     It's time to shift gears, like Dad would have wanted me to.  
e in this     *I'm listening, old man.*

When Matt walks into the store with two coffees, I know one of  
for me. He pauses when he gets halfway in, eyebrows raised, when  
ide her. the way I reorganized the shelves. After getting rid of all the old inve  
decided it was time to clean up the place a bit and do some revamping.  
waist to     “Hey,” Matt greets, passing me the cup and nodding toward the  
with his chin. “It looks great in here. You've done a lot of work.”  
ny hips     We slap hands before I lift the coffee to my mouth and take a  
needed sip. I haven't had any all day, and it's amazing I'm still func  
considering I spent most of the night helping Raine study for one  
h other upcoming exams.

The space feels a lot more open between the shift in shelving and  
ie page. work to clean old grime up. It wasn't that the place was dirty, i  
amazing what some deep cleaning can do.

eaks up     “What did you want to talk to me about?” Matt asks, leaning aga  
countertop. “You said something about whatever it is being a  
gmund, opportunity for me.”

I set my coffee down and lean back in the new chair I got for beh  
counter. Bea dropped it off, saying it was an old one from the bak  
didn't like anymore because it didn't match the “aesthetic,” which I thi  
bullshit considering nothing matches there and I've never even seen th  
in all my years of getting baked goods and caffeine at her place.

normal.     “You know a kid on the football team named Wells? He's one of t  
ery day     running backs that took over my position.” Whenever I see the  
ie's not     campus, he always waves a little too excitedly at me until one of his  
smacks him into stopping.

ded me     Matt's brow wrinkles. “I don't know. Maybe? I've only been to a  
roud.     the games. One of the new coaches is a fucking snake, so I don't rea  
pping it     like going and watching him fuck up the team more than Pearce did  
the end.”

o see. I My lips twitch upward. “I’m actually kind of glad you said that.”  
are for Confusion twists his expression.  
sarily a I grab the paper that I took off the corkboard by the student center  
ik frommy bag and slide it over to him, watching as he scans the bolded line  
across the front.

“You thought of me when you saw a job posting for the university?”  
I tap the bottom. “It’s for coaching. Wells came up to me a while  
them issaying he thought I should consider it, but I had way too much on my  
he seeseven entertain the idea. Then I started wondering if I should reach  
ntory, Isomeone in HR because they’re willing to pay for grad school during  
employment.”

e aisles Matt looks up at me. “Why didn’t you reach out then? If they could  
some of that stress off your shoulders, then it’s worth a conversation.”

much- “I’m actually going to be taking a break after this semester to. Rig  
tioningI want my attention to go to the store and family stuff. Dad was right.  
of herreally need this degree. If I change my mind, I’ll come back to it, but  
other things to focus on. Adding coaching into my schedule would have  
l all theimpossible when I’ve barely had time to even get my schoolwork done  
but it’snow. It’s not in the cards for me.”

Matt frowns. “That sucks, man. So you’re leaving the university  
inst theMay?” He acts like I won’t be minutes away.

a good “Don’t miss me yet. I’ll obviously be here, and you know where  
apartment is. But yeah. It’s time for me to step back and stop trying  
mind theall, like you guys keep telling me.”

ery she It’s about damn time I accepted that taking care of myself doesn’t  
ink wasI’m showing weakness. I know my support system will ensure I don’t  
is chairburning both ends of the stick like I was, and I’m good with that. He  
have people who I can turn to.

he new Took me long enough.

kid on He huffs out a sigh and nods, eyes going down to the posting again.  
friendsyou think *I’d* be good for this? I’ve never been much for leadership.”

That’s because he’s never had to be. “You know the same things I  
few ofyou said yourself the current coach is a joke. What better way to char  
lly feelthan to *be* the change the team needs? You’re in grad school too. You  
towardjust as well off getting the financial help. Plus if you’re on staff, then  
things with you and Rachel won’t seem so damning.”

He stands a little taller at the mention of her. “You’ve really thought out, huh?”

I lift a shoulder. “I’m looking out for a buddy. You should call the lettering pop by the office if you’re interested. But, Matt?” His brows go up and meets my eyes. “You’d make a great coach. This is your chance to prove it?” I know how you miss that life.”

His eyes go back to the paper. “I have to admit, part of the fun with the plate was the chase.”

I don’t say anything.

His nostrils twitch. “That got old though,” he murmurs.

All I do is nod and pat him on the arm. “I bet. But this is your opportunity to do something about that. If you two want to make it work, here’s a chance to do it.”

He grabs the paper and folds it, tucking it into his back pocket. “You wouldn’t have done something like that. I never tell you about the time he had an interview at the grocery store to be a bag boy when I was fifteen?”

I hadn’t known that, but I smile. “Sounds like something he’d do as it wanted to help anyone who needed it. Why didn’t they give you the job?”

Matt flinches. “They might have remembered me from an incident a couple of years before then.”

“What was the incident?”

He looks sheepish. “Shoplifting. It was *one* pack of gum and a carton of milk. I was dared to do it. Turns out the cameras actually worked. The douc who dared me to steal that shit said they were dummy cameras that didn’t mean people from stealing.”

Shaking my head, I ask, “Did my dad ever ask you about the job application to interview?”

Matt snickers. “Yep. When I admitted why they wouldn’t hire me, he said, ‘You better pull your head out of your ass, son. You’ve got to have the potential to screw yourself over by doing dumb shit.’”

I can practically hear Dad saying that, which makes something out of my chest lighten under the pressure that’s been sitting on it for a while. “That’s right.”

“Yeah. He was.” I can tell he’s thinking about Rachel when he mentions her. “Still is.”

We’re quiet for a long moment.

ght this “Thanks for this,” my friend finally says, patting his back pocket. ‘

I’ll reach out to them this afternoon. It’s probably time I do what you  
hem orsays and make something of myself.”

p as he Standing with my coffee, I point out what he obviously doesn’t see  
ve that.already were. This is just another option to explore. For you and your  
future you decide to have.”

h Rach He glances at his phone, then at the door, before turning back  
“You’ve probably heard this a lot from your mom, but I know you  
would be proud of you. I’ll miss bugging the shit out of you on campus  
think the move you’re making is a good one. Selfless.”

ortunity Even if I have heard it before, it still means a lot to me. My tone is  
way togravelly when I offer a thick “Thanks” in response. “Hey. Before you go

He waits for me with raised brows. “You okay?”

our dad I swipe a palm down my leg. “You’ve had a good life, right?  
got meadopted didn’t make any big changes that you regret or anything, did it  
Matt blinks. “Wow. Uh...”

do. He I haven’t told him or DJ about the situation with Raine or what the  
b?” holds. That’s not necessarily my story to tell. Not yet anyway  
ident aunderstand why he’s looking at me like I’m insane for asking that ques

“No. All the changes I went through were good ones because  
parents. I doubt I’d say the same if I were with my biological ones, w  
idy bar.they are. My dad says life has a funny way of putting us where we need  
hebagsWe may not always understand it, but we should never fight it.”

o scare Yeah, my dad would always say the same thing to me. “Thanks. A

He dips his chin in acknowledgment as he backs toward the front  
fter the“Oh, by the way, DJ texted about the celebration party for Sheldon. I

doing RSVPs so they know how much pizza to order. It’s *Teenage*  
me, he*Ninja Turtles* themed.”

o much Why am I not surprised that he’s throwing a party for his new tort  
still can’t believe Skylar agreed to getting him one.”

; in my My friend snickers. “The things we do for love. Am I right?”

He was I find myself smiling, thinking of everything I’ll do for Raine to  
sure she knows I’m in this no matter what. “Right.”

ambles,

“I think  
our dad

is. “You  
hatever

to me.  
our dad  
is, but I

is a little  
go...”

’ Being  
t?”

the future  
’. So I  
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d to be.

gain.”  
it door.  
They’re  
*Mutant*

oise? “I

o make

## Epilogue

# RAINE

THE SOFT KNOCK from the doorway has me lifting my smiling face from sleeping six-month-old in my arms to the old man watching us rock in the chair he made from scratch. “Told you he’d love the rocker,” Leo says, walking in slowly with his cane.

I bend down to press a kiss against Bentley’s head. “He hasn’t been finicky since we started using it. And those bottles you suggested have been a godsend. He doesn’t puke as much as he did. My mom had to come home with laundry when I was going through all the shirts he was getting over.”

Leon stops beside me, carefully reaching down to brush his finger against Bentley’s plump cheek. “Jenna swore by those bottles. Their young son had the same problem with colic, so I was hoping they’d help.”

Bentley coos, making my heart melt. He’s had a chokehold on me since Skylar put him into my arms for the first time. I always knew that DJ would have cute babies, but I never expected them to be *this* perfect.

“You know,” I tell Leon quietly, hugging Bentley a little tighter against my chest, “you’re basically his honorary grandpa. Sky said so herself when she picked him up last time. She’s glad he has a grandparent figure since I’m so far away in Cali.”

Leon’s lips twitch. “God help the child.”

I snort, shaking my head at the man I’ve grown close to. He likes to come over for food for us even though I’m getting better at cooking these days. I think it’s really an excuse to see the baby since he makes appearances whenever we’re babysitting for the new parents. It was a few weeks after Bentley’s birth that he met little Bentley Lucas for the first time, and he brought a goody basket of diapers, binkies, and hand-me-down clothes that he wanted to pass along to someone who needed them. Like the rest of us, Leo has been wrapped around Bentley’s finger ever since he was born.

Sky's junior year.

When DJ and Skylar told us that they were expanding their family beyond their four-legged tortoise son, I was ecstatic. Shocked but excited. Apparently, we weren't the only ones surprised by the news. The parents of the adorable infant were too when they found out over the summer how far from home Skylar was. And when DJ invited Caleb and me over for dinner before he was born, the last thing we expected was to be asked to be godparents.

What made it even more special was the name they chose. DJ was as finding someone with a 1938 Bentley like the one Richard wanted to restore and getting a picture with a custom-made onesie for their future frame for Caleb and his mother. They wanted to honor a man so near to Lindon loved.

And they did.

Caleb's mother has the picture in her living room, hanging next to other images of her, Richard, Caleb, and me over the years.

Even though he was worried about his mother being alone in her childhood house, I can tell Denise is happy to be surrounded by so many good memories. She's even come back to the store, which is good since her website has boosted business for them like Caleb hoped it would.

When I'm not at Bea's or school, I try popping by to help whenever I can. But it's easy to see the mother-son duo have things handled. And when they spend time together that I know they need now more than ever.

I get it. Every Friday, I see my father for our usual lunch dates, and on Saturday, I see Mom for homecooked meals in. Even though we still have a third of what we try creating, it's fun. They're both doing better than ever have, and it makes me happy for them. For all of us.

"Want to hold him?" I ask, standing up and gesturing toward the high chair. I wait until Leon's carefully seated before putting the baby in his arms. "How's Jenna and the family?"

His eyes are focused on my godson when he says, "They're doing good. We're celebrating Thanksgiving at my house this year. I was wondering if you and Caleb would like to come."

I smile as he plays with Bentley's tiny hand. "I'll have to see what's got planned because we might be doing something with our parents, but let you know."



Our families have been talking about doing a group holiday together at Caleb's mom's house since our apartment is too small to have everyone at once. It'll be our first get-together with both our parents, so I want everything to go smoothly.

Leon smiles when Bentley's fingers wrap around part of his hand. "Well, they're all more than welcome too. The more the merrier. And they would invite half the town for the holidays and make enough food for the county."

He still tells me stories about his late wife all the time, especially about Jenna and I formally started the Annemarie Project, which has gotten some local news after a 5K walk we planned back in March for endometriosis awareness month.

Our goal is to start small, raising funds to give to other organizations we can partner with in the future for educational purposes. We'd love to do events for other national awareness months and to find educators to start health classes in high schools, so we've been mapping out the best neighborhoods to work with while building a name for ours.

I know Leon is proud to have his wife's legacy full of so much love and I know their's only going to spread farther and wider the more we share our stories.

Even though I'm focusing on finishing my clinical hours, we still spend time together so he can teach me new things. For my twenty-fourth birthday he gave me roses from her rose bushes and told me he'd help me with a garden out front if I wanted. "It could be our next lesson. Annemarie taught me everything I know," he said, studying the front yard of our apartment building. It's bland at best, barely any lawn for Sigmund to go on, but I'll stay here until we figure out something else.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask, watching the two of them together. Bentley makes little baby noises.

His lips twitch higher at the common question he gets a lot from me. "I never stopped you before."

I huff out a laugh. "Have you ever thought about life after Annemarie? Seeing somebody new? Having a companion again?"

"I got a dog, didn't I?"

He knows I'm not referring to the golden retriever he adopted early in the year. "But what about a human companion who isn't a baby or relative?"

ether at     There's no hesitation. "No."

ne over     "Why not?"

I want     He continues to rock my godson. "For the same reason you went  
the Anders boy," he answers easily. His eyes lift to mine. "Beca  
thumb.amount of time or distance could ever make us forget how much v  
remariethem. You can never lose that feeling when it's the person you're mea  
for thewith."

His loyalty to his wife is adorable. There's still a light in h  
y sincewhenever he talks about her. She's one of the few people outside of l  
viral inand his own grandchildren who could soften his features.

etriosis     Leon's eyes go back down to the little boy in his arms. "Do you  
know the wisest thing Annemarie ever said that still sticks with me  
ons thatday?"

to host     Interest has me standing a little straighter.

peak to     "She said," he tells me, playing with Bentley's chubby cheeks v  
nprofitsfinger, "that you will never know the true value of a moment until it b  
a memory. I'm sure she got it from one of those books she loved read  
ve, andit's true. Looking back, there's not one thing I would change becau  
es.     was how our story was supposed to go. Hard times and all."

still get     Before I can say anything, I hear Caleb call out as he walks thro  
day, hefront door. Within seconds, he's in the guest room where we keep l  
gardenduring his visits, with a huge smile on his face as soon as he sees his g

ght me     He presses a kiss against my temple. "I'm sorry I'm late. Ronny l  
artmenthis little girl by the store, and we got to exchanging war stories."

it'll do     My eyes roll at his reference to the diaper fiasco we experienced o  
when DJ and Skylar had a date night. It was messy and the foules  
ether asCaleb and I have ever smelled, but it was practice for the future  
determined to build for ourselves someday. Once I finish my certificat  
ie. "It'sget a stable job in an office and Anders Hardware finally quiets from  
business he got from the website remodel.

emarie?     "We'll have to have them over for dinner sometime. Speaking of"-  
to Leon, who's in the process of standing up to pass Bentley over to  
—"we'd love to have you for dinner tonight if you can stay. I finally j  
lier thisturkey casserole recipe you gave me to good use."

lated to     Leon simply says, "I've got nowhere else to be tonight."

I turn from him to the man holding our godson and feel a warmth

chest that hasn't gone away since Bentley first looked up at me with gorgeous blue eyes. Leaning my cheek against Caleb's shoulder, I let my head rest on his back to content breath and soak in what we've made for ourselves despite our obstacles.

And I realize in that moment that I wouldn't change a single thing about my story with Caleb either.

Because we learned from all the pain.

"One day," he whispers, kissing my temple and staring down at me. "Bentley, this will be us. You ready for that?"

And I reply with the same word I hope to tell him when he asks to come back. "Yes."

to this

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## Chapter One

# SKYLAR

**B**AD DECISIONS TASTE like rum, coke, and something metallic. A taste reminds me of the time my older sisters dared me to see how many quills could fit into my mouth at once.

With fluttering eyelids and heavy limbs, I come to with a dry mouth and a cloudy head, finding it hard to move in the soft sheets covering my body. Sheets that don't feel as soft as the expensive, certified-organic threads covering the twin mattress in my room.

The bed under my leaden limbs feels too lumpy, nothing like the memory foam pad covering the school-supplied mattress on my raised frame.

One of my sticky eyelids peels open in confusion, vision blurry but I try to take in the unfamiliar setup of the room. It's bigger and colder than the double I share with my freshman roommate Rebecca, and the furniture is nothing like the stuff I have.

It takes a few seconds, but I quickly realize the reality of the situation. Bolting upright, I careen to the side when dizziness slams into me. The sheet falls down my body, exposing the untied, wrinkled purple wrap-around borrowed from my friend Aliyah that's exposing the peach bra I'd slipped underneath. I suck in a sharp breath when my eyes go to the empty chair beside me, then slowly to the side, where I see what's thrown onto the floor.

Time stops.

Panic seeps into my rib cage.

I lift the sheet and shakily lower it once I see the naked skin it's covering. I then glance back at the black leggings and panties in the middle of the floor. They're the only things I'd worn that were mine. The shirt, shoes, and pushup bra were all from the girls I befriended who insisted I needed to get dressed up for the party they were dragging me to.

*You'll have fun.*

*We won't let you out of our sight.*

My recollection of the events beyond letting them play with my straight black-dyed hair and telling me what makeup would look best on my t is fuzzy.

Too fuzzy to put together how I got in a room I don't recognize v pants off.

Doing a quick scan to double-check that I'm alone, I toss my le the side of the bed and wince at the ache between them. I bolt tow clothing, worried someone will bust in. Tugging the panties up my stop when I glance down and see the small smears of blood on the ins my thighs.

I stare.

Not breathing.

Not blinking.

*Thud, thud, thud.* The drumming between my head and heart is i demanding my attention as I stare at the red smattering my skin.

A moment or two later, I force myself to finish getting dressed wit hands.

Pressing an ear against the wooden door to see if I hear anyone ou I quietly turn the knob and creep out of the room with my borrowe heels tucked in my hands and my heart lodged in the back of my throat

I cringe at each creak of the floorboards under my bare feet as down the narrow hallway toward the wooden staircase. I don't kno time it is because my phone is dead, but the sun is out and blindi making the headache throbbing inside my temples ten times worse.

As I creep down the steps and toward the front door, I notice that no remnants of a party left. No plastic cups lying around, no food carpet, no weird boozy smells that I vaguely remember from the night

The bits I do recall consist of a packed house that made n claustrophobic, loud music that made it impossible to hear what my were saying as I followed them into the mass of bodies, and the s cheap beer.

I'm almost to the door when I freeze midstep after hearing, "Who are you?"

My body locks up from the deep voice behind me. I don't recog not that that says much. I'm not familiar with most men around her my small circle of peers is made up of my roommate Rebecca and a fe

ubborn, girls—Deanna and Aliyah—I met during orientation a month before.  
an skin     Footsteps come from somewhere else, stopping close by. A second  
less deep and more amused, says, “Huh. I thought everyone did their w  
with my shame already. Sorry, big man.”

I make myself look over my shoulder, but I don’t know why. I  
gs over with two different faces. One boyish and clearly amused, if the miscl  
ard my glint in his blue eyes is any indication, and the other full of...nothi  
legs, I emotion. Nothing readable. The shorter of the two—though not by r  
sides of grins at me before scoping out my body in a once-over that makes me  
make a break for it.

If I were smart, I wouldn’t let them stare and leer. The shorter on  
his head until his messy blond hair flops over his forehead and lips k  
He elbows his friend, who looks massive and far less enthused  
n sync, presence in comparison.

Both are built like athletes. Strong. Broad. Like they could take  
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d black     How did I get separated from them?

t.     “We didn’t know anyone else was here,” the taller, stoic-looking o  
I tiptoe me. His lips press into a firm line as he watches me, eyes nar  
w what Accusatory.

ng me,     I’m uncomfortable.

Hungover.

there’s     Confused.

on the     It doesn’t take much to figure out what exactly happened last night  
before. makes me feel itchy. Dirty. My mouth feels dry as cotton, and I just  
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If I were smart, I wouldn’t let them stare and leer. The shorter one cocks his head until his messy blond hair flops over his forehead and lips kick up. He elbows his friend, who looks massive and far less enthused by my presence in comparison.

Both are built like athletes. Strong. Broad. Like they could take down another person their size or larger if they wanted to. Deanna said the party was at the football house.

*We won’t let you out of our sight* is what Dee promised me.

How did I get separated from them?

“We didn’t know anyone else was here,” the taller, stoic-looking one tells me. His lips press into a firm line as he watches me, eyes narrowing. Accusatory.

I’m uncomfortable.

Hungover.

Confused.

It doesn’t take much to figure out what exactly happened last night, and it makes me feel itchy. Dirty. My mouth feels dry as cotton, and I just want to go back to the dorms and take a long, hot shower.

*We won’t let you out of our sight.*

But where are they now?



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Caleb and Raine's story would not be possible without the wonderful team. I struggled with these characters from day one and went through many different drafts before finally writing this beautiful romance. I didn't believe I could do it, I might have thrown in the towel long ago now.

And a BIG thank you to all the readers who have patiently waited for this book. I know it's been a long time coming, but I'd like to think it's worth the wait.

Until the next books

xx B

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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