

A muscular man with short dark hair and a light beard is the central focus. He is wearing a black tank top and has his arms crossed. He is standing in a locker room, with several white lockers visible in the background. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his physique.

the
RULES
WE
Break

ALLIE EVERHART

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The Rules We Break

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CHAPTER ONE

DARCY

“WHAT WAS THAT NOISE?” I ask, jumping up from the couch.

Theo walks up behind it and reaches behind the cushion. He pulls out a half-eaten bag of potato chips and smiles. “I was looking for these.” He opens the bag and digs his hand into it, pulling out a handful of chips. “You crushed them.”

“Because they were in the couch!” I march over to him. “I can’t live this way.”

“What way?” he asks, stuffing the chips in his mouth.

“This!” I motion to the living room, which is littered with empty pizza boxes, soda bottles, chip bags, and who knows what else? I’m afraid to look too closely, fearing what I’ll find. “It’s disgusting! I can’t live like this.”

“Yeah, okay,” he says, walking to the kitchen. “I’ll work on it.”

“What does that mean?” I follow him to the fridge. “That you’ll clean up the mess?”

He shrugs as he opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of soda. “It means I’ll work on it. I’ll try not to leave chips on the couch.”

I watch as he walks back to the living room with the chips and soda. He sits down on the couch and turns on the TV.

Taking a deep breath, I try to remain calm. The guy is driving me crazy. And I’ve only lived with him for three days! How am I going to survive an entire semester?

Storming over to the couch, I grab the remote from Theo, turn off the TV, and stand in front of him.

“Hey! I was watching that!”

“You weren’t watching it. You just turned it on.”

“I want to see the sports highlights. I missed the game last night.”

Taking another deep breath, I sit down beside him and calmly say, “Theo, we need to talk.”

“About what?” He takes a drink of his soda.

“Our living arrangement.”

“What about it?” he asks, leaning back and putting his arm up along the back of the couch.

“If we’re going to be roommates, you need to clean up after yourself.”

“I just told you I’d try to stop leaving chips on the couch.”

“Yes, but it’s more than that.” I pick up an empty soda bottle from the floor. “Like this bottle. Could you throw it away instead of leaving it on the floor?”

“That’s not mine. It’s Colton’s.”

My mind drifts to Colton, the blond-haired hottie I’ve been obsessing over since last year when I sat behind him in Freshman English. I didn’t have the confidence to talk to him back then, but now, halfway through my sophomore year, my confidence has grown, along with my crush on Colton.

Now that I’m living with Theo, who happens to be one of Colton’s best friends, I might actually have a chance with him. Colton’s over here all the time, which is one of the reasons I agreed to live with Theo. That, and because I had no other options. When my former roommate Avery ditched me to live with her boyfriend Wes, I decided it was time to move out of the dorms and live off campus. But finding a place in the middle of the year is nearly impossible. Wes suggested I live here and rent out his room since he was moving in with Avery. He assured me Theo was a great roommate.

Great roommate? Not even close. Wes either overlooked all of Theo’s annoying traits or he lied to get me to move in.

“Are we done?” Theo asks.

“No.” I set the soda bottle on the coffee table and turn to Theo. “Can you explain something to me?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t it look like this when Wes lived here? When Avery and I would come over, there weren’t chip bags in the couch or soda bottles on the floor.”

“Wes is kind of a neat freak. Not like he cleaned all the time, but he’d pick up the place.”

“Okay, but I’m not going to do that. I’m not picking up after you.”

He shrugs. "I don't expect you to."

"Which means I need *you* to do it. You need to pick up after yourself."

"I said I'd try." He holds his hand out. "Now can I have the remote?"

"You need to do more than try. I can't live like this." I get up and walk over to the chair next to the couch. "Your socks have been on this chair since I moved in."

"I'll pick them up when I do laundry."

"Theo, you're not getting it. We share this room. I can't even use it when your dirty clothes are everywhere." I look down and notice his boxers under the coffee table. "Theo, why is your underwear under the table?"

He peers under it and smiles. "Awesome! I was out. Now I don't have to do laundry tonight."

I stare at him. "You're going to rewear those?"

"They're clean. I must've dropped them when I was folding laundry. Throw them over." He holds his hands in the air like he's about to catch a football.

I back away. "I'm not touching those."

"C'mon. They're clean."

"Still not touching them."

"Then give me the remote so I can watch the sports highlights."

"You're not going to pick them up?"

He gets up, walks in front of me, and picks up his boxers. He turns to me, smiling. "We good?"

"It's a start."

He leans down to my face, looking me in the eye. "You know, most people get along with me just fine."

"Because they don't have to live with you."

He straightens up. "If you don't like it here, you're free to go."

"And live where? It's December. Nobody needs a roommate until summer."

"Guess you're stuck with me then," he says with a smirk as he yanks the remote from my hand. He goes back to the couch and sits down, tossing his boxers on the cushion next to him.

I let out an annoyed sigh. "You're impossible."

He's not even paying attention, his focus on the TV and whatever sports show he's watching. I don't have a brother, but if I did, I imagine him being like Theo. Messy. Annoying. Immature.

The doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it,” I say, going to get the door. Wes and Avery are there.

“Hey!” I give Avery a hug. “I didn’t know you guys were coming over.”

“Wes texted Theo,” Avery says. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“No,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Which doesn’t surprise me.”

Wes laughs. “Still adjusting to living with him?”

“You could say that.” I move aside to let them in.

“Hey, man,” Wes says, going over to Theo.

“Hey, you see the game highlights from last night?”

“Let’s go upstairs,” I say, grabbing Avery’s arm. “I need to talk to you.”

“Um, okay,” she says, giving me a confused look. “Wes, I’ll be upstairs with Darcy.”

“Yeah, babe,” he says, sitting in the chair next to the couch.

Keeping hold of Avery, I hurry her up the stairs and down to my room.

“It’s looking really nice,” Avery says, glancing around the room, which I still need to finish decorating. “It’s so much different than when Wes lived here. He had like no stuff.”

I shut the door and race up to her. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Live with Theo. He’s driving me crazy! It’s at the point I’m starting to become like you, or how you used to be, before Wes loosened you up.”

“I feel like I should be insulted by that,” she says.

“I just mean how you used to be kind of uptight about stuff. Tense. Like you couldn’t relax. And you used to make all those rules. I used to tease you about it. And now…”

“Now *what*?”

I grip her shoulders and look at her. “This morning, I caught myself making a list. A list of rules. Roommate rules. I even wrote them down!”

“Yeah? So? What’s wrong with that?”

“Avery, seriously?” I turn and walk to my desk, picking up the notebook where I listed out the rules. I hold it up. “This isn’t me! I don’t make rules! I’m spontaneous. A free spirit. Up for trying new things.”

She shrugs. “Maybe you’ve changed.”

“I haven’t changed.” I drop the notebook and walk up to her. “It’s Theo. He’s the one making me like this! You know what I found under the coffee table?”

“What?”

“His underwear! And he didn’t see a problem with that.” I throw my hands up. “And I sat on a bag of chips, which for some reason were under the couch cushion.”

Avery tightens her lips, trying to hold back a laugh.

“Avery, this isn’t funny!”

“It’s kind of funny. Seeing you get worked up like this? You’re always so chill.”

“Exactly! Look what he’s doing to me!”

“He’s a guy. Guys are messy. You knew that before you moved in.”

“It wasn’t like this when Wes lived here.”

“Wes is the exception. He doesn’t like living in a mess so he’d pick up around the house.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not doing that. I’m Theo’s roommate, not his mother.”

“Did you try talking to him?”

“Yes, and he doesn’t think it’s a problem. You know how he is. Nothing bothers him.”

“I think stuff bothers him. He just hides it well. Theo’s a really nice guy if you just give him a chance.”

“I never said he wasn’t nice. I said he was a slob who thinks leaving his underwear under the coffee table is acceptable.”

“That is pretty bad, but it could be worse. He could’ve left them in the kitchen,” she says with a laugh.

I sigh. “You’re not helping.”

“You need to give it more time. Adjusting to living with someone is hard at first. You and I didn’t get along right away.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I say, thinking back to our first week together in the dorms. I wanted to have guys over and stay up late and Avery wanted to study and go to bed early. It took a couple weeks and a few arguments to finally work things out.

“And hey,” Avery says. “At least he’s nice to look at.”

“Who?”

“Theo.”

I shrug. “He’s like a brother. I don’t see him that way.”

“C’mon, Darcy. You don’t think he’s even a little hot?”

My mind goes to last night when Theo came home from the gym wearing a workout shirt that fit tight to his chest and barely stretched around his huge biceps. The guy’s got a good body, I’ll give him that. Did I feel a slight tingle

when I saw him in that shirt? Maybe, but that's totally normal. I'm a girl. He's a good-looking guy. And I have a thing for football players.

"Colton's hotter," I say. "And he's more mature." I walk over to my bed and sit down. "And I don't have to live with him."

"Theo's not immature." Avery comes over to the bed and sits next to me. "You're being too hard on him."

"All he does is play video games."

"A lot of guys do. Girls play too. In high school I used to play those games for hours."

"Only because your boyfriend did."

"True, but it was kind of fun. You should try playing with Theo sometime."

I look at her like she's crazy. "I don't see that happening."

"Colton loves video games. You could have Theo teach you how to play and then maybe you could play with Colton."

"Huh. That's actually a good idea."

"See? Living with Theo isn't so bad."

"Yeah, if you don't mind living in garbage."

"Things will get better. You just need to give it some time."

"Hey, maybe we could switch roommates! Wes can live here and I'll live with you."

"Nice try, but I'm going to stay with Wes."

"So how's it going with you two?" I get up and go over to my desk to get my phone from the charger.

"Great! We haven't fought once since moving in together. I'm really surprised. I thought by now we'd have at least one argument."

"You're probably too busy having sex," I say, swiping through my phone.

"You might be right."

I look up from my phone. "You guys really do it that much?"

Avery just smiles, which tells me they do it all the time.

"I'm jealous," I say, leaning back against my desk. "I haven't had sex in months."

"Maybe you'll meet someone at the party this weekend."

"I doubt it. Most people have already gone home."

"When are you leaving? Did you decide?"

"Probably not until the 23rd. My parents work all the time so if I go home, I'll just be sitting around, bored."

“What about your friends?”

“They have to do family stuff. They won’t have time to get together.”

“But if you go home, you’ll get a break from Theo.”

“I thought about that, but I still think I’ll stick around here. I need to unpack and get my room the way I want it. I want to shop for a new lamp and maybe a rug.”

“I guess that means you’re going to keep living with Theo.”

“I don’t have a choice. My dorm room is gone and I can’t find anyone else who needs a roommate.”

“You could do a lot worse than living with a football player who has his hot football player friends over all the time.”

“Yeah, and it’s only for a few months.”

“A few months?”

“I told Theo I’d only be here until May. After that I’ll go somewhere else. I’m already looking for summer rentals. There’s tons of them. I just need to pick one.”

“Why don’t you wait and see how things go? Maybe after a few weeks, you’ll like living with Theo.”

“I doubt it.” I smile. “Unless Colton comes over every night.”

“I was thinking about that.”

“About what?”

“You and Colton. I don’t really see you with him.”

“Why? You think he wouldn’t go out with me? Because I’ve seen the girls he’s dated and—”

“It’s not that. I think he’d go out with you. I just don’t see you guys hitting it off.”

“I didn’t see you and Wes getting along and now you’re living with him.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” She gets up. “Let’s go downstairs and see what the guys are up to.”

“They’re just watching that sports show. Let’s stay up here. Tell me what you’re doing for Christmas.”

As Avery talks, I realize how much I miss having her as my roommate. We got on each other’s nerves now and then, but it wasn’t often. And the longer we lived together, the better we got along. I don’t see that happening with Theo. It’s only been a few days and things are getting worse, not better. How am I going to survive an entire semester with him?

CHAPTER TWO

THEO

“I DON’T KNOW if I can keep doing this,” I say to Wes.

“Doing what?”

“Living with Darcy. She’s driving me fucking crazy.”

Wes laughs. “C’mon, it can’t be that bad.”

“Trust me, it is.” I lean back on the couch. “She’s on me about every little thing. I can’t relax. And when have you ever known me to not relax? I’m the most chill guy on the team.”

“You guys just need time to adjust to living together.”

“What about you and Avery? Are you guys having a hard time adjusting to living together?”

“Not at all, but that’s different. We’re dating.”

He nods. “You have sex too much to fight.”

“Something like that,” Wes says with that half-smile of his.

“Yeah, well, I don’t have that option with Darcy. I need to find some other way to make this work or we’ll kill each other before we even make it to winter break.”

“So what’s the problem? What are you guys fighting about?”

“She expects me to keep the place spotless, for one. But I’m not a damn maid. I’m not going to spend all my time cleaning.”

Wes glances around the room. “To be fair, the place does look pretty bad.” He looks at the couch cushion where my boxers are sitting. “Please tell me those are clean.”

“They are, but Darcy still freaked out about it. I don’t know what the big deal is. I wouldn’t care if she left her panties all over the place.”

“Girls are different. Most of them don’t like living in a mess. Could you

at least try to pick up a little?”

“I could, but it still won’t be good enough for her. I thought you said Darcy was easygoing.”

“She is. I mean, compared to Avery. If you knew how Avery was when I met her, you’d think Darcy was totally laid back.”

“Maybe she’s changed, because she’s definitely not like that anymore.” I put my feet up on the coffee table. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

“Give it more time. It’s only been a few days. And her telling you to put your underwear away really isn’t asking that much.” He looks around the room. “You know, having this place cleaned up a little isn’t a bad thing. Girls aren’t going to want to come over if your place is a shithole.”

“When have I ever had problems getting girls? You really think having chips on the floor is going to make a difference?”

“It might, for the right girl.”

“If she’s the right girl, she won’t care what the place looks like.”

“Putting up with your mess doesn’t make her the right girl.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for a girlfriend. I’ve got too much going on.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you met a girl you really liked.”

“And how would you know?” I say, watching the scores from last week’s games scrolling along the bottom of the TV.

“Remember the party we had before Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

He laughs a little. “You were really drunk. So drunk you started crying about how much you wanted a girlfriend.”

I look at him. “What the fuck are you talking about? I wasn’t crying.”

“Maybe not crying, but there were tears. Drunk tears.”

“You’re making this up.”

“We were in the kitchen. Avery came in there and kissed me and told me she loved me. She went back to the party and you got all weepy, saying how much you wanted what Avery and I have.”

I shake my head. “What I say or do when I’m drunk isn’t real. It’s just me being stupid.”

“Or saying what you really think. The truth tends to come out when people are drunk.”

“Okay, yeah, maybe I’d like to have a girlfriend, but I’m not in a hurry to find one. I get plenty of girls who just want to hook up. For now, I’m good

with that.”

“What about Darcy?”

“What about her?”

“Would you ever consider dating her?”

“Darcy?” I laugh. “She hates me. She can’t even stand being around me.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“She doesn’t need to. All she does is complain about me and tell me all the shit I’m doing wrong. I bet she’ll move out after winter break, which is fine with me. I can afford this place on my own. I was just doing her a favor letting her stay here.”

“She has nowhere to go. All the apartments in town are full.”

“Then she can live with you and Avery. You got a spare room.”

“That we’re using for storage. I put all the stuff from my old room in there.”

Wes went to his parents’ house last weekend. He hadn’t been there for months. He’d had a big fight with his mom and stepdad and said he’d never go back, but Avery talked him into it. She went with him last weekend and convinced him to take his stuff, which his mom had packed into boxes and put in the basement.

I lower the volume on the TV and turn to Wes. “How’d it go last weekend? I haven’t talked to you since you got back.”

He shrugs. “Same old shit. James looking at me like he wishes I didn’t exist and my mom putting on a fake smile and pretending like everything’s fine. They’re so fucked up. I hate going there. At least Avery was there to help me through it.”

“How was your mom?”

“She didn’t say much. I’m pretty sure she was drunk when I was there.”

“That’s tough. But I’ll probably be going home to the same thing. Every time I talk to my mom on the phone she sounds like she’s been drinking.”

“Have you talked to your stepdad about it?”

“What’s there to talk about? He knows what’s going on. He can only do so much. He’s sent her to rehab three times, but it doesn’t work if she doesn’t want to get better.”

My mom’s been an alcoholic for as long as I can remember. She started drinking after she had me. She was 18 and had just graduated from high school. Her boyfriend got her pregnant, then took off before I was born. He joined the military and my mom never saw or talked to him again. A few

months later her parents were killed in a car accident, leaving her with no one. She was left trying to raise me on her own. She drank to deal with the stress. It got so bad social services almost took me away. Knowing she could lose me sobered her up. Soon after that, she met Steve, my stepdad. He was 25, had a good job, and didn't drink. They got married a year later and had Ella, my half-sister. By then, my mom was 21 and old enough to buy alcohol. According to my stepdad, she had a big party with her friends and got really drunk. That started her drinking again and she hasn't stopped, but she's never too drunk to function. My stepdad calls her a functioning alcoholic. He's given up trying to make her quit.

"I think she's getting worse," I say, tossing the TV remote on the coffee table.

"Why?" Wes says. "Did something happen?"

"On Thanksgiving I found two empty wine bottles in the trash that weren't there the night before. And she had a bottle of wine during dinner and another one later that day."

"It was a holiday. People drink more on holidays."

"It wasn't that. I think she was drinking more because of my dad. My mom's friend from high school was in town that week and I overheard my mom talking about him."

"Your stepdad?"

"No, the asshole who left before I was born."

"What'd she say about him?"

"That she thinks it's her fault that he left. And that I'll never know my dad because of whatever she did."

"How could him leaving be her fault?"

"It's not. The bastard left because he didn't want to take care of a kid. He left my mom with no support, no money, and turned her into an alcoholic. I don't even know him and I fucking hate him."

"Is he still in the military?"

"I'm not sure. My mom never heard from him after he took off."

"Do you even know his name?"

"No. My mom didn't put it on my birth certificate. I used to ask her about him when I was younger, but she refused to answer my questions. She said Steve is my dad and that's all I needed to know." I reach over to the coffee table and pick up the remote. "You want to watch the game? It starts in 10 minutes."

“Avery wants to get home. She has to be up early tomorrow for work.”

“She could go and you could stay here. I’ll give you a ride back when the game’s over.”

“Maybe some other time. I’m hoping to get some alone time with Avery before she goes to sleep.”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes. “You guys do it all the time. I haven’t seen you in days. We need some bro time. And I need you here to play referee between me and my new roommate from hell.”

Wes laughs. “Darcy’s not that bad. You just need to get to know her.”

“How can I get to know her when all she does is yell at me?”

“That’s really all she does? Because that doesn’t sound like her.”

“Maybe not all the time, but it feels like it. I just want to relax, not be told to pick up my socks. Even my mom doesn’t do that.”

“Why don’t you just try to pick up a little? It wouldn’t kill you.” Wes looks back at the kitchen. “What the hell’s all over the fridge?”

“Barbecue sauce. I squeezed the bottle too hard and it went all over the place.”

“Why didn’t you clean it up?”

“Because I was eating. I’ll do it later.”

Wes gets up. “I’m actually on Darcy’s side on this. The house looks like shit.”

“What the hell? I thought we were friends.”

“We are, but you’re a slob.” He walks to the stairs and yells, “Babe! You ready to go?”

“I’m coming!” Avery yells back.

I go over to Wes. “You’re really leaving me with her?”

“You’ll be fine. Just talk to Darcy and see if you guys can work this out.”

“Wes, I’m telling you, you have no idea what it’s like living with her.”

“You’ll figure it out. And hey, look on the bright side. Instead of living with a dude, you’re living with a hot girl.”

“I never said she was hot.”

“You never said she wasn’t.” He smiles a little. “You think I didn’t notice you checking her out?”

“Okay, yeah, she’s hot, but that doesn’t make her any less annoying.”

“I’m ready,” Avery says, running down the stairs and into Wes’ arms.

He kisses her and gives her a smile that says he can’t wait to get her home. “Let’s go.”

“You sure you want to leave?” Darcy says, hurrying down the stairs. “We could watch a movie.”

“There’s a game on,” I tell her. “It starts in a few minutes.”

“Then you and Wes could watch the game,” she says, “while Avery and I hang out upstairs.”

“I need to go,” Avery says. “I have to be up early for work.”

“What about tomorrow?” Darcy asks. “You want to come over? You could help me decorate my room.”

“I would, but Wes and I already have plans.”

“Oh,” Darcy says, her shoulders slumping.

“Why don’t you have Colton over?” Avery says. “You guys could play that video game he likes.”

“That’s a great idea!” Darcy says.

I stare at her. “You told me you hated video games.”

“I didn’t say I hate them. I just haven’t played them. Do you think you could teach me before Colton comes over?”

“It’s a complicated game. You have to play it a lot to figure it out.”

“Then we’ll do something else. We could all watch a movie.”

“Colton’s busy tomorrow,” I tell her. “He has a date.”

“A date with who?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask. Why do you care?”

“She has a crush on him,” Avery says.

“You like Colton?” I say to Darcy.

“No!” She gives Avery an annoyed look, like she didn’t want her telling me that. “I just thought we could hang out.”

“You know he’s even messier than me, right?” I say.

“Nobody’s messier than you,” she mutters.

“I’ll take you to his place and you can see for yourself.”

“We’re gonna head out,” Wes says, putting his arm around Avery. “We’ll see you guys later.”

I walk them to the door. “What about this weekend? You coming to the party?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” Wes says. “We’re not leaving until next week. We don’t know what day yet.”

Darcy comes up beside me and talks to Avery. “You want to meet for lunch tomorrow?”

She glances at Wes. “I already told Wes I’d meet him for lunch after he

goes to the gym.”

“Okay, well, maybe later this week.”

“Yeah, we’ll pick a day.” Avery smiles at Darcy and me. “You two have a good night!”

Wes and Avery leave and I shut the door.

“I’ll be up in my room,” Darcy says, heading to the stairs.

I walk back to the couch. “So you like Colton, huh?”

She stops before she reaches the stairs. “I don’t really know him. But I’d like to.”

“Meaning you want to fuck him?” I huff. “Get in line.”

She storms over to me. “That is not what I meant. I said I wanted to get to know him.” She shrugs. “If we got along, maybe we’d go on a date.”

“He’s not looking for a girlfriend. He had one last summer and found out she was still seeing her ex. After that, he decided to take a break from relationships.”

“It’s December. Maybe he’s ready now.”

“He’s not. And even if he was, he doesn’t have time. His grades have been going down. If he doesn’t study more next semester, he may not be able to play next fall.”

Darcy smiles. “I could study with him.”

“If that’s really what you want,” I say, grabbing the remote and changing the channel to the football game. “Just don’t get your hopes up.”

“So what about the video game? Will you teach me?”

“No.” I keep my eyes on the TV as highlights from last week’s game play on the screen.

“Why not?” Darcy sits beside me. “You’re done with classes. And I just have a paper to turn in. You could teach me tomorrow.”

“If you’re doing this for Colton, make *him* teach you.”

“I can’t. I’ll get nervous and won’t be able to concentrate.”

I look at her. “Why would you be nervous?”

“Because I like him.” She looks away. “There, are you happy? I admitted it.”

“I still don’t get why you’d be nervous. Is it because he plays football?”

“It’s not about football, although I admit that does make him hotter.”

I focus back on the TV. “I play football. And I’m better at it than Colton.”

“Yeah? So what are you saying?”

“You’re not nervous around *me*.”

“Because I see you like a brother.”

“Why am I like a brother?”

“Because you’re messy and we fight all the time.”

I nod toward the TV. “Game’s starting.”

She gets up. “Goodnight.”

“You don’t have to leave,” I say as she walks away. “I was just saying the game’s starting.”

“I know how guys get when a football game’s on. You want to be left alone.” She gives me a weak smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She goes upstairs.

She seems sad. It’s because she misses Avery. She doesn’t see her much now that Avery’s living with Wes and spending all her time with him.

Maybe I should go talk to her. I’ve been kind of a jerk to her since she moved in. I wasn’t trying to be that way, but she gets on my nerves when she’s always telling me to clean up. Looking around, I guess it is getting messy in here. I don’t even notice it, but it bothers Darcy so much that she won’t even spend time down here. Since moving in, she’s spent all her time in her room.

Going to the kitchen, I get a garbage bag from the box under the sink. I can see the TV from here so I keep watch on the game as I toss out the empty bottles and takeout containers that are on the counter. The dirty dishes are still there, but I’ll deal with those later. Taking the trash bag to the living room, I toss out the bottles and chip bags that are on the floor and the table. Then I go out to the garage and toss the bag in the trash can.

When I come back inside, I grab a beer from the fridge and go to the couch to watch the game. It feels strange watching it alone. I always watch games with one of the guys, usually Colton, Eli, or Wes. I haven’t adjusted to Wes not being here. He was a great roommate, but I get that he wanted to live with Avery. The guy’s totally in love with her.

I don’t see that happening for me. Finding a girl I love while I’m still in college? All the girls here only want to date me because I play football. They have no interest in getting to know me. It’s that way for a lot of the guys on the team and most of them are okay with it. I used to be, but now I’m getting tired of it.

A commercial comes on and I get up to find something to eat. On my way to the kitchen I pause a moment, wondering if I should go talk to Darcy or leave her alone. I think about what Wes said, about trying to get to know her,

and decide to invite her to watch the game with me. If she says no, at least I tried.

CHAPTER THREE

THEO

GOING up to Darcy's room, I knock on the door. "Darcy, you awake?"

"It's only eight," she says, opening the door. "I don't go to bed this early."

But she's dressed for it. I'm guessing those are pajamas, but I'm not sure. She's wearing tight pink shorts that are like a girl version of my boxer briefs and a loose white t-shirt that's short enough to show her stomach. For someone who claims to hate working out, the girl's got a damn good body. Her stomach's flat and her legs are long and lean. She's tall, probably 5'9, and all legs.

"What do you want?" she asks, bringing my attention back to her face. She doesn't have makeup on, but I think she looks better without it. When she's not wearing it, her eyes stand out more. They're bright blue and the first thing that caught my attention when I met her.

"I was wondering if you want to watch some of the game with me."

"I thought you wanted to watch it alone," she says, leaning against the door frame.

"I wanted to watch it with Wes, but he ditched me for Avery."

"Yeah, those two are inseparable," she says, rolling her eyes.

"So what do you say? You want to watch the game with me?"

"I guess I could." She takes one of those fabric-covered elastic things from around her wrist and uses it to put her hair up. She has long wavy blond hair that I've been finding all over the floor and on the furniture. It's another thing I'll have to get used to. "Let me grab my phone."

As she walks over to get it, my gaze drops to her ass. It's tight and round—fucking perfect. I feel my cock twitch and quickly glance away. That shit

can't be happening. She's my roommate. I can't be thinking of her that way. I didn't think that'd be a problem until now, seeing her in those tiny shorts and that cropped shirt.

"Okay." She returns to the door. "Are you going to move?"

"Oh. Yeah." I step aside and let her go first.

We go down the hall and down the stairs.

As we're walking into the living room, she stops suddenly. "Did you clean?"

"I just picked up a little."

She turns to me. "For me?"

"I realized this is your house too. I don't want you stuck in your bedroom all the time because it's too messy down here."

She smiles a little. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Hey, sorry if I've been a jerk the past few days. I'm just not used to living with a girl. I need time to adjust."

"I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to nag you about cleaning. I just got used to living with Avery, who liked everything to be clean and organized. I think she might've rubbed off on me. Messes didn't used to bother me as much as they do now."

"I'll try to pick up after myself, but I can't promise you anything. All I can say is I'll do my best."

"So is this a truce?" She holds her hand out to me.

"Truce."

We shake on it, then she goes to the kitchen while I return to the couch.

"Shit, they scored and I missed it," I say, picking up my beer.

"You want something to eat?" Darcy yells from the kitchen.

I pick up my bag of chips and notice it's empty. "I'll take some more chips."

Darcy joins me on the couch with a bottle of water and bag of chips. "We can share." She rips open the bag and offers it to me.

"What the hell is this?" I ask, holding up a green chip with black speckles all over it.

"They're kale and chia seed chips," she says, taking one for herself.

"That sounds disgusting. Why'd you buy these?"

"They're supposed to be healthy. I'm trying to lose weight before the holidays. I always eat too much at Christmas."

"Lose weight?" I glance at her body. "You're fucking gorgeous."

Shit. Why did I say that? I didn't mean to. It just came out when I looked at her long lean legs folded up next to me on the couch.

"You think I'm gorgeous?" she says, smiling a little.

I look back at the TV. "You have a good body. I can't believe you don't work out."

"I tried to, but I got bored and stopped. But when I lived at home, my mom and I would go to yoga class a few times a week."

Maybe that's how she got that body. I've never tried yoga, but I've heard it's a good workout.

"Are you going to eat it?" she asks, pointing to the chip I'm still holding.

"No." I toss the chip on the table. "I'll get something else at the next commercial."

"I'll try it if you do."

"You haven't had them?"

"No, I bought them because they have half the calories of potato chips." She scrunches up her face as she looks at the chip. "I didn't think it'd be this green. Would you try it with me? It'll be like a roommate bonding experience."

I sigh as I pick up the chip. "Count of three. One. Two. Three." We bite into the chip. Darcy took a tiny bite, but I ate the whole thing.

She coughs. "Oh God, it's disgusting."

"It tastes like shit. Who the hell would eat these?" I burst from the couch and race to the kitchen, spitting out the chip in the trash.

Darcy's behind me at the fridge. "How do I get rid of the taste?"

"Grab a beer. The alcohol will kill whatever it was we just ate."

"Here." She hands me a beer and grabs one for herself.

We stand there, gulping down the beer. Darcy spits some out as she laughs.

"What's so funny?"

"Those were so bad. I don't think I've ever tasted anything that horrible."

"I can't believe you made me eat that."

"Sorry." She's still laughing. "I'll throw the rest out."

I open the cabinet above the fridge and pull out a bag of potato chips. "Here." I offer her the bag.

"You can have them. The beer used up the rest of my calories for the night."

"Forget the fucking calories. You don't need to diet."

“Have you seen the girls Colton goes out with?”

“Is that what this is about? You’re trying to lose weight for Colton?”

“It’s not the only reason. I told you, I always gain a few pounds during the holidays.”

“Everyone does, and you’ll still look good even if you do.” I drink my beer. “Why are you trying to change how you look for some guy?”

She shrugs. “It’s just what girls do.”

“They shouldn’t. That’s stupid. If a guy doesn’t like you the way you are, he’s not the guy for you. And just so you know, Colton would rather have a girl with some curves than one of those skinny girls you’ve seen him with.”

“Then why does he date them?”

“Because they’re the ones always begging to go out with him. But it doesn’t go anywhere. If he wanted a girlfriend, he’d pick someone who wasn’t that skinny.” I walk back to the couch. “We’re missing the game. Bring the chips.”

I return to the couch with my beer, setting it next to the one I haven’t finished yet. Darcy sits on the opposite end of the couch, facing me, her legs stretched out.

“Making yourself comfortable?” I ask, glancing at her legs.

“Why wouldn’t I?” She pops a chip in her mouth and tosses the bag to me. “I live here.”

I grab a handful of chips and toss the bag back to her. “When are you going home for break?”

“I haven’t decided. I might stick around for your party.”

I’m having a party next Thursday for anyone who’s still in town. Then on Friday, I’ll head home for winter break. My finals were done last week so I could’ve gone home earlier, but I get bored when I’m there and I don’t like being around my mom when she’s drinking. She uses the holidays as an excuse to drink more, and by holidays I mean the entire month of December.

“Don’t you want to go home sooner?” I ask. “To hang out with your family?”

“I’m an only child so it’s just me and my parents and my parents are always working.” She takes a chip and tosses me the bag. “I’m done.”

“You sure? This is your last chance. I’ll eat the whole bag.”

“I’m good.” She takes a sip of her beer.

I can’t believe she’s trying to lose weight for Colton. She doesn’t need to lose weight, for any guy.

“Touchdown,” I say, watching the game.

“How long have you been playing football?” Darcy asks.

“For as long as I can remember.” I stuff some chips in my mouth. “My mom said she gave me a football when I was three and I took it everywhere we went, like other kids do with stuffed animals. She said I’d hug it to my chest and keep dropping it because it was almost as big as me.”

“Aww, that’s cute,” Darcy says. “I bet you were adorable.” She lays back more, her feet almost touching my leg. “Did your dad play football?”

“I don’t know.” I stare at the TV, my chest getting tight at the mention of my dad.

“You never asked him?”

“Never met him. I don’t even know his name. He got my mom pregnant in high school and took off before I was born.”

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay. My mom ended up marrying a guy a lot better than my dad. He stuck by her even when she—” I stop, deciding not to tell Darcy about my mom’s drinking. I barely know this girl. I don’t need to be sharing my whole life story with her.

“When she what?”

“Nothing.” I gulp down what’s left of my beer. “Forget it.”

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“I’m trying to watch the game.”

Darcy starts to say something, but then stops herself. She wants to talk. It’s another thing I have to get used to, living with a girl. They always want to talk. When Wes lived here, we could watch an entire game and only say a few words.

“Go ahead,” I say to Darcy during the commercial.

“What?” she asks, looking up from her phone.

“You were saying something and then stopped.”

“Oh, I was just going to ask you something, but never mind. You’re trying to watch the game.”

“It’s a commercial. Go ahead and ask.”

“Could you teach me about football? I know the basics, but I want to know more so I can talk to Colton and not seem like I’m totally clueless.”

Why is she trying so hard to get with Colton? She doesn’t even know him, and he’s not looking for a girlfriend. He’s a good guy and one of my best friends, but he’s not ready to get serious with a girl.

I look at her. “You’re doing this for Colton?”

She shrugs. “And to learn more about the game. My dad doesn’t like sports so I didn’t grow up watching football. But going to the games this year, I’m really getting into it. I just don’t know all the rules.”

“If you want to know for yourself, I’ll teach you. But I’m not doing it if it’s for Colton.”

“Why? I thought you guys were friends.”

“We are, but you shouldn’t be doing all this for Colton, or any guy. You don’t have to try so hard.”

She sits up straighter. “Then I’m doing it for me. So will you teach me?”

“What do you want to know?”

“That guy right there.” She points to a guy running down the side of the field. “What’s his position and what’s he supposed to do?”

I explain it to her, and continue to explain stuff to her for the next hour. I was hoping to just kick back and watch the game, but she won’t stop asking me questions. I don’t mind teaching her this stuff. I just don’t want her doing it for Colton. I wish I could convince her he doesn’t want to date anyone right now, but she seems determined to go out with him.

“I’m getting tired,” she says, yawning.

“Go to bed.”

“I want to see the end of the game.” She tucks her legs in, then stretches them out a little. “I can’t get comfortable. This couch is too short.”

“It’s not too short. Go ahead and stretch your legs out.”

“I can’t. You’re huge. You take up half the couch.”

“Here.” I pick up her feet and place them over my lap.

“Really?” She smiles. “You don’t mind?”

“Game’s back on.” I point to the TV as I reach for my beer. I’m on my fourth one. I was going to quit at three but then remembered I don’t have class tomorrow. I’m done until next semester.

As I go to drink my beer, I somehow miss my mouth and beer spills all down the front of my shirt. “Shit.”

“What happened?” Darcy asks.

“I just spilled beer all over me.”

“Go change your shirt.”

“Not with the score this close. I’ll just take it off.” Keeping my eyes on the game, I yank off my shirt and toss it on the floor. “Don’t freak out. I’ll pick it up after the game.”

Darcy doesn't say anything. I look over at her and see her staring at my chest, her mouth slightly open.

"What are you looking at?" I ask.

"Nothing." Her eyes dart back to the TV and she clears her throat. "Aren't you going to be cold without a shirt?"

"No. I run hot." And I've been feeling even hotter looking at Darcy all night in those tight shorts, having her long legs sprawled out beside me on the couch, watching her crop top ride up every time she moves, showing off her flat stomach and almost giving me a glimpse of her tits.

I can't let my mind go there. She's my roommate, and everyone knows there's a rule against getting involved with your roommate. Not that it'd ever happen. Darcy's determined to go out with Colton. She has no interest in me. And I have no interest in her. But damn, she's nice to look at.

CHAPTER FOUR

DARCY

“HOW’S YOUR NEW ROOMMATE?” Avery asks. I called her while I was waiting for my latte. Since classes are over, I slept in, then went to a coffee place a few miles from the house. I’m still getting used to living off campus and having to drive everywhere. After three semesters in the dorm, I got used to everything I needed being within walking distance.

“I watched the game with him last night.”

“Wes and I watched it too. Until we decided to do something else,” she says with a smile in her voice.

“Would you stop telling me how much sex you’re having?” I notice the guy at the counter glance up at me. I turn away from him and lower my voice. “It’s getting really annoying.”

“I didn’t say we had sex.”

“You implied it. And I know you guys did it. You do it like five times a day.”

She laughs. “We don’t do it that much.”

“Still, I don’t need to hear about it.” I walk away from the counter and look out the window. “You know how long it’s been for me?”

“Wasn’t it last May? With Paul?”

Paul was a guy I dated for a month before deciding we weren’t a match. He transferred to a different college last fall.

“It was June,” I tell her. “Remember Spencer? The lifeguard?”

“That’s right. I forgot about him.”

I wish I could. Spencer was hot, so I assumed he’d be good in bed. But he was horrible. It was the worst sex I’ve ever had.

“You’ll find someone,” Avery says. “Especially living with Theo. You’ll

have guys over there all the time.”

“I’ve lived in that house for three days now and the only guy who’s been there is Wes.”

“Order for Darcy,” the guy at the counter yells.

I walk back to the counter and get my drink.

“So how did last night go?” Avery asks as I sit at one of the chairs that face the fireplace. “Are you and Theo getting along better?”

“We didn’t fight after you left, so I guess that’s progress. Oh, and he cleaned. Well, not really cleaned, but he picked the place up. I don’t know what made him do that, but I’m glad he did.”

“Wes might’ve said something to him.”

“That makes sense. I didn’t think Theo would do it on his own.”

“At least he did it. Did you ask to watch the game with him?”

“No, he asked me. And then I asked him to teach me more about football so I’d have something to talk about with Colton.”

“You still want to go out with him? I thought Theo said Colton has a date tonight.”

“A date doesn’t mean he’s committed to her. Theo said Colton isn’t ready for that. He doesn’t want anything serious right now.”

“Then why are you trying so hard to go out with him?”

“Because maybe he’d change his mind if he met the right girl.” I sip my latte, gazing at the fake flames in the fireplace. “So what are you up to today?”

“I just got off work. I need to shower and then Wes and I are going out for lunch.”

“Is he still at the gym?”

“Yeah, he’s doing extra workouts this week since he can’t work out when we’re at my mom’s house.”

Wes is going home with Avery for Christmas. He hasn’t been getting along with his family so he didn’t want to be there over the holidays.

“I heard Theo leaving the house at seven,” I say. “Do they always work out that early?”

“It’s even earlier during the semester. They have to get their workouts in before class. And then they work out again later in the day.”

That explains why Theo’s so ripped. When he took his shirt off last night, I tried not to stare but I couldn’t help it. I knew he was in good shape, but not that good. I could see every muscle that lined his chest. He’s even got abs,

like an actual six pack. For a guy who's always eating junk food and drinking beer, I can't believe his body looks that good.

"Darcy? You still there?"

"Yeah. So what about tomorrow? Do you want to do something?"

"I have to work in the morning, but we could do something after that."

"I need to buy some stuff for my room. You want to go shopping with me?"

"Sure. Maybe I'll find something to get Wes. He said he doesn't want anything for Christmas, but I have to give him something. I just can't come up with any ideas. He doesn't really need anything."

"How about something for yourself? Something sexy that Wes would like?"

"I thought about that, but I don't want him opening that at my mom's house."

"So do it privately, before you guys leave for break. Then get him something else to open in front of everyone."

"That's a good idea. Hey, I should go. Wes will be home soon and I need to get ready."

"Okay, bye!"

As I end the call, I hear a deep voice at the counter. "No, just the coffee."

Looking up, I see Colton standing at the register, looking really hot in his black coat and faded jeans. He pays for his coffee and moves down the counter, his eyes on his phone.

My heart beats faster as I walk over to him. "Hey, Colton."

He glances up at me and smiles. "Hey. Avery's friend, right?"

He doesn't know my name? We've talked several times. It's always been at parties when he's drunk, but still, I thought he'd remember my name.

"Darcy," I say, smiling back at him. "Avery's friend and Theo's new roommate."

"That's right. He said you were moving in this week." Colton runs his hand through his dark-blond hair. "I had finals the past couple days so I haven't been over there."

"Order for Colton," the guy at the counter says.

Colton gets his coffee, then walks back to me. "So how do you like living with Theo?"

"It's been an adjustment."

"I could see that. He's not used to living with a girl. He'll have to learn to

pick up his shit.”

“Yeah, we had a few arguments about that,” I say with a laugh. “But I think we worked it out.”

“Theo’s easy to get along with once you get to know him. He’s one of the nicest guys I know. I’m sure you guys will figure it out.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we will. Hey, do you want to sit down? I got a spot by the fireplace.”

“I can’t. I’m heading out. I have stuff I need to get done before I go out later.”

“On your date?”

He smiles a little. “How did you know I have a date?”

“Theo mentioned it.”

“I don’t even remember telling him.” Colton checks his phone. “I need to get going. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, bye,” I say as he leaves.

When I get home, Theo’s in the kitchen, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. Why is he not wearing clothes? It’s winter, and it’s cold in here. I know he said he runs hot, but he can’t be walking around here half-naked all the time. It’s very distracting, especially with a body like that.

“Hey,” Theo says, opening the fridge. “Did you have breakfast?”

“Yeah.” I hold up my coffee.

“That’s it? I was going to make eggs.”

“I’m good with coffee,” I say, watching him put the carton of eggs on the counter. “It’s after ten. Didn’t you already eat?”

“I eat like six meals a day. This is my second breakfast.” He takes out a skillet and puts it on the stove.

“Do you always cook naked?”

“I’m not naked. I’m wearing a towel. Just got out of the shower.” He cracks six eggs in the skillet then mixes them up with a fork, his muscles flexing as he moves. I shouldn’t be staring at him, but whenever I look away, my eyes find their way back to him. “You sure you don’t want some?” he asks, pouring the eggs in the skillet.

“What?” I glance up at his face.

“Eggs. I can make more.”

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.” I sip my coffee as Theo turns to the stove and puts the skillet on the burner. Now I’m staring at his back, which is all muscle, and his ass, which is stretching the towel. I’m surprised it’s stayed on

with him moving around like that.

“It can be dangerous cooking without clothes,” I say.

He turns back to me. “If you want me to go put something on, just tell me.”

“I’m not saying you have to. I just thought you might want to.”

“I’m still hot from the shower. I wanted to cool off before I put clothes on. But if it bothers you that much, I’ll go get dressed. Can you watch the eggs?”

“Yeah, okay.” I go around the counter, passing Theo as he heads to the stairs. Whatever soap he uses smells really good. It’s a fresh, manly scent, like he just got back from the woods.

“Are they almost done?” he asks, returning to the kitchen a few minutes later dressed in jeans and holding a t-shirt.

“No. I just turned the heat up,” I say as he comes up beside me.

He puts his shirt on. “I can take it from here.”

I hand him the spatula. “I’ll be up in my room.”

“Why don’t you stay? Keep me company?”

“Why do you want company? I thought you liked being alone.”

“I hate being alone. I’m a people person. Wes is the one who likes being alone. He used to get annoyed when I’d ask him to hang out with me down here. He wanted to be alone in his room.”

“I’m that way too.” I sit on the barstool that’s next to the counter.

“You like being alone?” Theo asks, moving the eggs around the skillet.

“No, I meant I like being around people. That’s one of the reasons I wanted a roommate. I didn’t like the idea of living alone and having no one to talk to.”

“Didn’t you say you were an only child?”

“Yeah, and I didn’t like it. I begged my parents for a sister, but they didn’t want any more kids.”

“Having a sister isn’t that great.”

“You said you liked your sister.”

“I love her, but she drives me crazy.” He opens the fridge and takes out a package of shredded cheese.

“What does she do that drives you crazy?”

“Wears skirts that are way too short. Goes out with guys who are too old for her. Doesn’t listen when I warn her about a guy.” He sprinkles cheese over the eggs.

“So you’re protective of her. That’s nice.”

“But she doesn’t listen to me. Her last boyfriend cheated on her and the signs were all there, but when I tried to tell her that, she said I was making it up because I didn’t like the guy.”

“Is it true? That you didn’t like him?”

“Of course I didn’t like him. He was dating my sister.” Theo turns the heat down on the stove. “I think these are done. I’m just going to let the cheese melt.”

“They smell good.”

“Last chance,” he says, getting a plate. “You want some?”

“Maybe just a little.”

He grabs another plate and divides up the scrambled eggs, then gets us each a fork and sits next to me at the counter.

“If it was just me here,” he says, “I’d eat right out of the pan. But now that I’ve got a girl living with me, I’m trying to be more civilized.” He laughs a little, before shoveling eggs in his mouth.

I smile. “I appreciate your efforts.”

“Does that mean you’ll help with the dishes?”

“Sure. I kind of have to since you did the cooking.”

“Do you like to cook?”

“Not really. Do you?”

“Yeah. I just hate the cleaning up part.”

I turn to him. “If you cook, I’ll clean up.”

“Seriously?” he asks, his mouth full.

“We could try it. Just for a few weeks?”

“I’d be open to that.”

“Great! So what’s for dinner?”

He looks at me. “I wasn’t going to cook every meal.”

I laugh. “I was joking. I’ll just go out.”

“Or we could order a pizza.”

“That sounds good.”

I’ve only had a few bites of my eggs, but Theo is already done. He eats faster than anyone I know.

“You’re good cleaning up?” he asks, taking his plate to the sink.

“Yeah. What are you going to do?”

“Play some video games. I need to unwind after that workout. Coach stopped by and was yelling at us.”

“Why was he yelling?”

“It’s just what he does. Nothing we do is ever good enough for him.”

Theo goes over to the couch.

“Are you playing that football game?” I ask as Theo turns on the TV.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Will you teach me how to play?”

“If it’s for you, yeah. If it’s for Colton, then no.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because you shouldn’t be changing yourself for some guy. I tell my sister that all the time and she still hasn’t figured it out.”

“I’m not changing myself. I’m just learning something new.”

“Which you wouldn’t do if you weren’t trying to date Colton.”

“I don’t think he’s interested. I saw him when I got coffee today and he didn’t even remember my name.” I finish my eggs and take my plate to the sink.

“You talked to him?” Theo asks, looking back at me.

“I asked him to sit me with me, but he said he had to leave. He barely even looked at me.”

“He probably just had something on his mind. He has a hard time focusing on more than one thing at a time.”

“Maybe that was it, but I still can’t believe he didn’t remember my name. We’ve talked at parties and had English class together last year.”

“Why don’t you find someone else? Someone who actually wants a girlfriend?”

“Like who?” I ask as I put the plates in the dishwasher.

He doesn’t answer. He’s got the video game going and has already started playing. I clean the skillet, then go to the couch and sit next to him.

“I’m ready.” I smile at Theo, but he’s looking at the TV.

“You’re really making me teach you?”

“I’m not making you, but I’d like it if you at least showed me the basics.”

He sighs as he hands me the game controller. “Have you ever played video games before?”

“Yeah, but not this one. I played one with these cute little pink cats that had to go through a maze and if they ran into a unicorn, they had to start over.”

He stares at me. “Are you serious? That’s really a game?”

“Yes.” I laugh. “You have a sister. You should know this stuff.”

“She doesn’t play video games. She’s into all that social media shit. She and her friends post videos of themselves putting on makeup.” He restarts the game. “Okay, so start by practicing moving your player down the field.”

“How do I do that?”

Theo shows me on the controller. “Use this to go straight and this to move him to the side.”

He starts the game and I try to move the guy down the field but he gets tackled. I try a few more times and the same thing happens.

“You got to get him moving right away,” Theo says. “Let me show you.” He takes the controller from me and runs the player into the end zone. “Okay, now you try.”

“I can’t do it fast enough,” I say as my guy gets tackled again.

“Come here.” He motions me to move closer to him.

“Why? What are you doing?”

“Showing you how to use the controller. Move over more so I can reach around you.”

I move so my back is to him. He puts his arms around me and his hands over mine on the controller. I tense up, feeling Theo’s chest pressed against my back.

“If you’re not comfortable, I’ll move,” he says. “I just don’t know how to describe this in words. You need to feel how to move the controller.”

“Go ahead.”

He’s just showing me how to play. So why am I getting all tingly inside? Why is my heart beating faster? Why am I liking the feel of his arms around me?

“You see how I’m moving it?” he asks. “You gotta be smooth, not so jerky.” His thumb is over mine, slowly moving the button thing back and forth.

I clear my throat. “I think I got it.”

He moves his thumb off of mine. “Go ahead and try it.” He watches as I do. “Good, now circle it a few times so you feel how it moves. Do it softly at first, then harder.”

Why is everything he’s saying suddenly sounding dirty? And why am I so hot? I feel like I’m burning up inside.

“Like this,” he says, moving his thumb over mine since I wasn’t doing anything. I’m too distracted. Why am I feeling like this with Theo?

“When do I do this?” I ask, trying to regain my focus as he continues to

circle our thumbs over the controller.

“I’ll show you when we start the game again.” He continues to move my thumb with his. “You see how it feels?”

No, because I’m too busy imagining his thumb circling over other places. Every time he moves his hand, his whole arm moves and brushes against my breast, causing feelings I do not want to be feeling with Theo.

“I think we’re done,” I say, looking up at him.

“We just started.”

“I know, but I think that’s enough for today.”

He smiles a little. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“You seem nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. Why would I be nervous?”

Our eyes meet and I feel my heart going faster. I should get up, but I kind of like where I’m at. Theo’s arms are around me, he smells good, and I’m just now realizing how much I like his eyes. They’re a deep shade of brown with flecks of gold.

He slowly backs away. “We can try again later.”

“Yeah.” I get up from the couch. “I’m going to go unpack.”

“You’re not done yet?”

“No. I have more to do.” I don’t, but I needed an excuse to leave. If we’d stayed like that a few seconds more, I might’ve accidentally kissed him. Theo! My roommate, who I’ve always seen like a brother. So why am I seeing him differently now?

CHAPTER FIVE

DARCY

WHEN I GET UPSTAIRS to my room, I call Avery but she doesn't answer. I need to talk to someone and get my mind off Theo and how I felt when I was with him downstairs. I call up my friend Piper. She doesn't answer either. I try Livia, a friend from class.

"Hey," she answers. "I was just about to call you. Are you done with finals?"

"I was done last Friday."

"That's right. You told me that."

Livia finished her finals on Thursday then drove home for winter break.

"So what are you doing now that finals are done?" she asks.

"Theo's teaching me how to play a video game. The football one that Colton likes."

"Has Colton been over yet?"

"No." I pause. "I'm not sure Colton's the guy for me."

"Since when? You've been obsessed with him for over a year."

"Yeah, but he doesn't seem interested. I talked to him at the coffee shop this morning and he barely looked at me. What about that guy at the drugstore? The one who works at the pharmacy."

"What about him?"

"You think he's single?"

"No. I saw him on campus with his boyfriend."

"He's gay? Okay, well, I'll cross him off the list. Why is this so hard? Why can't I find one decent guy to go out with who isn't already taken?"

"Wait until after break. A lot of people end relationships right before the new year. You'll have a whole new crop of guys to choose from in January."

“I need someone now,” I say with a sigh.

“Why? What’s the rush?”

Because I’m worked up after being around Theo, who doesn’t seem to like wearing clothes and for some reason looks way hotter now than he did all last semester. I need to at least kiss a guy to get rid of this tension building inside me.

But instead of telling Livia that, I say, “I just want to go out. I don’t want to sit around the house all week.”

“Isn’t there a party this weekend?”

“At Eli’s house. I’m going with Wes and Avery.”

“Maybe you’ll meet someone there. Or hey, what about Theo?”

“What about him?”

“He’s hot. Funny. Everyone on campus loves him. Why don’t you go out with him?”

“I’m not going out with Theo. He’s like a brother. And he’s my roommate. You never date your roommate. It’s a rule.”

“Okay, but if you don’t, someone else will.”

“Liv, let’s go!” a girl yells in the background.

“My sisters and I are going to the mall to do some Christmas shopping,” Livia says. “Can we talk later?”

“Yeah. Bye.” I end the call and head back downstairs to get a drink. I stop when I see a girl on the couch next to Theo with long black hair and a really pretty face. Her makeup looks professionally done.

“Darcy,” Theo says when he sees me. “Have you met Erica?”

“I don’t think so.” I walk up to the couch. “How do you know Theo?”

“We used to go out,” she says, smiling at him. “I heard he hadn’t left town yet for winter break so I decided to stop by.”

“I’m not leaving until a week from Friday,” he tells her. “I’m having a party next Thursday. You should come.”

“Maybe I will,” she says, still smiling at Theo.

Does she want to get back together with him? Good for her. Good for both of them. I’m sure they’ll be very happy together. So why am I so annoyed seeing her with Theo?

“Erica works at the place where I get my hair cut,” Theo explains.

“You’re a hairdresser?” I ask.

She nods. “And I do makeup. I do how-to videos online.”

“She has a big following,” Theo says. “She’s even been hired to do

makeup for photo shoots.”

“That’s impressive,” I say. “Well, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to get a drink.”

“Why don’t you come over tonight?” Erica says to Theo as I go to the kitchen. I look over and see her scooting closer to Theo on the couch. “We can get takeout. Watch a movie.”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

He’s going over there? What about our plans to get pizza? Did he forget about that? Or would he rather go hang out with Erica? What am I thinking? Of course he’d want to be with her. She’s gorgeous and clearly still interested in him. If he goes over there, he’ll get sex. Here, he’d just be hanging out with his roommate.

“I need to get to work,” Erica says. She gets up, giving Theo a flirty smile. “See you tonight.”

“I’m not sure what time yet.” He walks her to the door. “I’ll text you later and let you know.”

When she’s gone, Theo joins me in the kitchen. “What are you doing tonight?”

“I thought I was getting pizza with my roommate, but I guess not,” I say, shutting the fridge door a little too hard.

“That was just an idea. If nothing else was going on.” He opens a cabinet and takes out a box of crackers.

“So I’m your backup plan?” I turn to him. “The person you hang out with when you have nothing better to do?”

He smiles a little. “What’s going on with you? Are you jealous I’m spending time with Erica?”

“No!” I go past him to get a glass. “I just don’t think it’s very nice to make plans with someone and then cancel them because you got a better offer.”

“I didn’t know we had plans,” he says, coming over to me and blocking the cabinet I was about to open. “Getting pizza was just a suggestion. But if you’re that upset about it, I’ll call Erica and see if I can go over there a different night.”

“You already told her you’d be there. And I get it.” I fold my arms over my chest. “You’re a guy. She’s a hot girl who’s obviously still interested in you. It makes sense you’d want to be with her instead of me.”

He stares at me a moment. “I’m confused. Do you want me to go or not?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Exactly, so why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m not yelling. I’m just…” I look away. “It was just miscommunication. I thought we had plans tonight, but we didn’t.” I take a calming breath and look back at him. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll do something else tonight.”

“You sure? Because if you’re that upset about it, I’ll change my plans with Erica.”

“I’m fine.” I smile at him. “Really.”

He sets his hand on my shoulder. “I’m really trying to make this work. Us being roommates. But you have to give me some time to adjust to living with a girl after living with guys the past year and a half.”

“Could you move?” I point to the cupboard behind him. “I need a glass.”

He turns to the cupboard, grabs a glass, and hands it to me.

“Thanks.” I bring the glass to the fridge and fill it from the water dispenser. “Do you think you’ll get back together with her?”

“Erica?” Theo says, watching me fill the glass. “Probably not. She’s not looking for anything serious.”

“And you *are*?” I ask, laughing because I can’t imagine Theo getting serious with a girl.

“I’m open to it,” he says, grabbing his box of crackers.

“Huh.” I stand across from Theo as he stuffs a handful of cheese crackers into his mouth. “I guess I never saw you as a relationship type of guy. All last semester you were with a different girl every week.”

“Yeah?” He digs his hand into the box of crackers. “So what’s your point?”

“It didn’t seem like you were looking for a relationship.”

“It just didn’t work out with any of the girls I went out with. Doesn’t mean I didn’t want a relationship,” he says before stuffing more crackers in his mouth.

“How are you still hungry? You just had breakfast.”

“I’m always hungry.” He motions to his body. “It takes a lot to feed this.”

“Let me have one.” I hold out my hand.

He offers me the box. “Take what you want.”

I reach in and grab a few crackers.

“Why don’t you go out with one of your friends tonight?” Theo asks.

“They all went home already. Except Avery, but she’ll be with Wes.” I

eat a cracker as I try to think of any single guys I know who might want to go out. But the only guys I can think of are Theo's friends. "What's Eli like?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen him at parties but haven't talked to him. What's he like?"

"He's smart. Pre-med. He studies a lot."

"But now that the semester's over, he'd have some free time. You think he'd want to go out tonight?"

Theo stops eating his crackers. "With you?"

"Yeah. I think it'd be good if I got to know your friends since they'll be over here all the time."

"I thought you wanted Colton."

"I don't think he sees me that way."

"So now you want Eli? Are you gonna try to date the whole damn team?" His phone rings and he takes it from his pocket. "It's Wes." Theo sets the box of crackers down and answers the call. "What's up?" Theo listens, then says, "It's gotta be his replacement. The school knows Coach is the reason we're losing games. If he doesn't retire, the school might force him to." Theo listens again. "Do you know when he's coming to campus?" Theo smiles. "Awesome. I can't wait to meet him." He pauses. "Yeah, talk to you later."

"What did Wes say?" I ask as Theo puts his phone down.

"The school is interviewing someone to replace Coach Daley." Theo goes around me to the fridge and takes out a soda.

"Like for next fall or now?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if this guy is really replacing him. I'm just guessing, but it wouldn't surprise me if the school brought someone in as an assistant and then promoted him to head coach. Wes thinks so too." Theo walks over to the couch. "I'd love to see the look on Coach's face when they tell him he has to leave. They should've fired him years ago. The bastard does nothing but tell us how much we suck." Theo huffs. "Real motivating."

I walk over to Theo. "When's the new guy getting here?"

"He's already here, checking out the town. His interview is Friday morning and he'll be meeting the team in the afternoon. Wes said the guy's been coaching at a small college in New Jersey and had three winning seasons in a row." Theo smiles. "This is the best news I've had all week. Let's get out of here and go do something. You want to go to lunch?"

"You just had breakfast. And ate a box of crackers."

"And your point is?"

I smile. "I'm still not used to how much you eat."

"If you want to go, it's on me. I'm celebrating getting rid of Coach."

"Okay, I'll go," I say, noticing it's already 11. "Give me a minute to change."

Theo lets me pick the restaurant so I choose my favorite cafe that serves really good salads and homemade breads. It's in an old house close to downtown. Theo never goes there, claiming the place is too girly with its frilly white curtains and pink tablecloths, but he still took me there and paid for my lunch. I don't know if he was trying to make up for cancelling on me tonight or if he really was just celebrating the possibility of a new coach, but either way, it was nice of him to take me out.

"You want to go to the mall?" Theo asks as we're walking to the car.

I laugh. "Are you joking?"

"No. Why?"

"You don't seem like someone who goes to the mall."

"I only go when I have to. I need to get Christmas gifts for my mom and sister. Since you're a girl, I thought maybe you could help me. I'll buy you lunch again if you do." He smiles. "I might even buy you dinner."

"You want me to shop for your mom and sister? I've never met them. I wouldn't know what they'd like."

"Trust me, anything you pick out will be better than something I'd get them." Theo opens the car door for me. "But if you don't want to do it, I can take you home. Maybe Erica would help me."

"No!" I blurt out. "I mean, you don't have to ask Erica. I'm happy to do it. I love shopping!"

"Great!" He smiles before shutting my door.

We go to the mall, which is really small in a town this size, but I'm a very skilled shopper. I'm confident I can find something Theo's mom and sister would like.

"What about a sweater for your mom?" I ask Theo as we stroll through the mall.

"She has way too many clothes. I'd rather get her something else."

"Does she wear scarves?"

"I don't think so."

"How about jewelry?"

"She has expensive taste. I can't afford anything she'd want."

I stop next to a bookstore. "What about a journal? Journaling is really

popular right now.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. She said she used to like writing back in high school.”

“Let’s go look at some.”

We go in the bookstore and pick out a leather-bound journal and a set of nice pens.

“I think she’ll really like that,” Theo says as we leave the store. “And I like that it has questions in it so you’re not stuck trying to figure out what to write.”

“Now we need something for your sister. How old is she?”

“Seventeen. She’ll be 18 next month.”

I stop and turn to him. “Wait, if you’re 20 and your mom met your stepdad when she was—”

“I’m 21. My mom held me back a year. I started college at 19. My mom met Steve about a year after she had me. They got married a year later, my mom got pregnant right away and they had Ella.”

I nod. “Now it makes sense. So your stepdad has been your dad for as long as you can remember.”

“Yeah. I don’t look anything like him so it’s obvious we’re not related, but he treats me like I’m his biological son.”

“So is your sister a senior?”

“Yeah, she’ll graduate in May. She’s already applied to Halston.”

“You two will be going to the same college?”

“If she gets in, which I’m sure she will. She likes the campus and that it’s not too big.” He smiles. “And of course she loves and admires her big brother and wants to be wherever he is.”

“That’s cute,” I say, pointing to a short plaid skirt and black sweater in a store window. “What do you think?”

“For my sister? No. That skirt is too short.”

“It’s not too short. That’s the style now.”

“She’s not wearing that.” He glances at me. “But it’d look good on you. Why don’t you get it?”

“I’m trying not to buy clothes right now. My parents pay for college, but I’m on my own for clothes and the money I made last summer is running out.” I turn to him. “You really think it’d look good on me?”

“With your long legs?” He glances down at them and smiles. “That skirt would look great on you.”

“You just said it was too short.”

“For my sister, yes. Not for you.”

“Why not me?”

“Because you’re not my sister.” He walks off.

Was he flirting with me or just making a comment? This being-friends-with-a-guy thing is all new to me. I’ve only dated guys, not been friends with them.

“What about this?” Theo points to a store window where there’s a pink fleece blanket with little white bears printed on it.

“If she was eight, sure,” I say, assuming he’s kidding.

“What do you mean? My sister loves blankets. And she likes pink.”

“But don’t you think that one looks kind of juvenile?” I say, trying not to hurt his feelings. “She’s going to college next year. Maybe we should try to find something a little more adult.”

“Like what?”

“Over here.” I grab Theo’s arm and lead him to the home store I went to when I was decorating my dorm room. It’s owned by a local woman who’s also an interior designer.

“What do you think of this?” I hold up a chunky knitted blanket that’s a mix of cream, gray, and soft pink colors. “It’s more sophisticated and still has pink, just a softer pink.”

“I could see Ella liking that. Let’s get it.”

We take it to the register and check out, then head back out into the mall.

“I could really use a coffee,” I say.

“Want to stop?” He points to the coffee place near the food court.

We go over there and wait in line. The mall is really busy today with all the holiday shoppers.

“This could take awhile,” I say, after waiting five minutes. “The line hasn’t moved.”

The man in front of us turns to us and says, “Someone said they don’t have enough workers today. That’s why it’s taking so long.”

“You want to just leave?” I ask Theo.

“I can wait.”

“Do you two go to the college?” the man in front of us asks.

“Yeah,” Theo answers. “We’re both sophomores.”

“Heading home for break soon?” he asks.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I say.

“I’m sticking around another week,” Theo says. “I play football and most of the team is staying here to train before going home.”

“Curt Hensley,” the man says, smiling and holding his hand out to Theo. “I might be your new assistant coach.”

Theo shakes his hand and smiles back at the guy. “A friend of mine just told me about you. He said you’re interviewing on Friday.”

“I’ve actually already had a couple interviews. This will be the third and final. I’ll know next week if I got the job.”

“Do you know how many people they’re interviewing?”

“As far as I know, I’m it. There were others earlier in the process, but I guess they weren’t a good fit.”

“So Friday is more of a formality,” Theo says.

He nods. “As long as I don’t screw up, I think I’ll get the job.”

“That’s awesome. We really need some new blood around here. No offense to Coach Daley, but I think everyone would agree it’s time for him to retire.”

“He’ll still be coaching. I’m just taking the job that should’ve been filled two years ago.”

Theo looks over at me. “When the assistant coach left a couple years ago, Coach Daley refused to fill the job. He didn’t want anyone else having input on the games or the team.”

“I think the college is finally seeing that an assistant is needed,” Curt says, “especially if Coach Daley is considering retiring in a year or so.”

“I was hoping it’d be sooner than that,” Theo mutters.

They continue to talk about football as the line slowly moves ahead. When we finally get to order, Curt combines his order with ours and pays for the three of us.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Theo says as we move away from the counter.

“You’re welcome.” Curt smiles at us. “It was good meeting you both. How long have you been dating?”

I choke on the coffee I just swallowed.

“We’re not dating.” Theo laughs a little as he pats me on the back. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Darcy’s my roommate,” Theo explains. “She just moved in.”

“Sorry,” Curt says. “I saw you two shopping together earlier and assumed you were a couple. Well, I’ll let you two get on with your day. I’ll see you

Friday, Theo.”

“Yeah, see you then.”

Theo’s beaming. He really likes that guy, or likes the idea of having a new coach.

“What’d you think of Curt?” I ask Theo as we drive back to the house.

“He’s great. He’s easy to talk to and seems open to new ideas. He’s going to be way better than Coach Daley.”

“How old do you think he is?”

“I don’t know. Maybe around 40? That’s actually old for an assistant coach at a small college, which makes me think the college has already talked to him about taking over as head coach once Coach Daley’s contract is up. I gotta call Wes and tell him.”

Back at the house, Theo calls Wes while I go upstairs to my room. I had fun shopping with Theo. Lunch with him was fun too. We got off to a rough start, but I think I’m going to like having him as a roommate. I just need to keep seeing him as that and nothing more.

CHAPTER SIX

THEO

“WE GOT THE FOOD,” I say, coming into Eli’s house, my arms weighed down with grocery sacks.

Darcy, Avery, and Wes follow behind with more. It’s Saturday night and Eli’s hosting the party tonight.

“I hope we got enough,” Avery says.

“I’m not expecting many people to show up,” Eli says. “Other than the team.”

Darcy smiles. “So the party’s going to be all guys?”

“I’m not sure,” Eli says, opening a bottle of beer. “We invited girls, but I don’t know if they’ll come.”

Colton walks through the door, a big grin on his face. “Let’s drink to the new coach.”

“They hired him?” I ask.

“No, but they will.” Colton joins us in the kitchen. “That guy is awesome.”

Curt Hensley met with the team yesterday at a meeting Coach Daley set up. He explained that the assistant coaching job was being filled and that Curt, if hired, would be doing mostly administrative work. Coach Daley made it clear he’s not giving up his coaching duties and that he’s still the one in charge. He kept interrupting Curt and correcting him to make sure Curt knew who was boss.

“We’d win every game if Hensley was in charge,” Eli says. “I usually hate all that pep talk shit, but Hensley actually had me believing it.” Eli puts his hand over his heart and dramatically says, “He inspired me.”

“Well, there you have it,” Colton says. “If the guy can inspire Eli, they

have to give him the job.”

“I’m sure they will,” Wes says. “If he’s made it this far, he’s got the job.”

“I wonder when he’ll start,” I say, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

“Probably after break.” Wes watches as Avery races around the kitchen. “Babe, slow down. I can help. Just give me a minute.”

“You’ll just rip open the bags.” She grabs a stack of bowls. “Darcy and I will make it look nice.”

Wes and I look at each other and shrug, silently agreeing it’s easier to let the girls do it than help out and do it wrong, or what they consider wrong.

“Colton, can I get you a beer?” Darcy asks, opening the fridge.

“Yeah, I’ll take one.”

She brings it to him, smiling. “I like your shirt.”

He looks down at it. “Thanks.”

She’s so obvious. And Colton’s clueless. The other day I asked him what he thought of Darcy and he didn’t even know who I was talking about. Like I told Darcy, Colton’s not looking for a girlfriend. When he wants sex, he’s got plenty of girls who will give it to him. Darcy wants a boyfriend, so I don’t know why she keeps trying to get with Colton. And if he doesn’t want her, she’s going after Eli next.

Every time Darcy talks about dating my teammates I get a tightness in my chest and this feeling that I need to go punch something. It’s like I’m jealous, but what’s there to be jealous of? I can’t go out with Darcy. She’s my roommate. Even if she wasn’t, she sees me like a brother and reminds me of that all the time. And yet when I walk around without a shirt on, I find her staring at my chest. And the other day we were watching a movie on the couch and she sat really close—closer than friends would sit. But she could’ve just been cold. She’s always cold and I give off a lot of heat. She was probably just using me to get warm.

A half-hour later, the beer’s chilling, the food’s set out, and the rest of the team starts arriving.

“I’m going to go change,” I hear Darcy say to Avery.

“Me too.” They run off to the bathroom.

“Why are they changing?” I ask Wes.

“Apparently they’re not wearing party clothes.”

“Why does Avery care? She’s not looking for a guy.”

“She didn’t want Darcy to look out of place.”

“Why? What’s Darcy wearing?”

“A dress, I think. So are you two finally getting along?”

“We still argue but not as much.”

“You ever see her, or does she just hang out in her room?”

“I see her all the time. She actually wants to spend time with her roommate, unlike some people.”

Wes smiles. “Hey, I needed my space. I wasn’t going to keep you company every second of the day. So what do you guys do?”

“Make dinner together. Watch movies. I’m teaching her how to play video games, but she’s not very good. We did some Christmas shopping. I took her to lunch.”

Wes turns to me. “What the hell? Did I miss something?”

“What do you mean?”

“It sounds like you’re dating her.”

“We’re not dating. We’re just hanging out.”

“People do not hang out that much with their roommate.”

“They do if they like spending time together.” I look at him. “Not everyone’s a loner who just wants to hang out in his room.”

“Let it go. I don’t live with you anymore. And yeah, I get that roommates hang out a lot, but when your roommate’s a hot girl it’s a different story.”

“I don’t see Darcy that way. She’s more like a sister.”

Wes’ eyes go to something across the room. “Your sister’s looking damn hot tonight.”

Following his gaze, I see Darcy coming into the living room wearing a short red dress that shows off her long legs. She’s got on black heels that look sparkly, like they have glitter on them. Her long blond hair that was up in a ponytail is now down, silky blond waves flowing down her back. And she must be wearing a padded bra because her tits look huge.

Wes nudges me. “You still seeing her like a sister?” He laughs a little. “Because it doesn’t seem like it the way you’re looking at her.”

“Shut up,” I mutter. “They’re coming over here.”

“You look beautiful,” Wes says to Avery, putting his arm around her and kissing her.

Avery changed into a black dress that’s tight at the top but flows out at the waist and ends just above the knee. It looks nice on her, but it’s more like a dress you’d wear to church, not a dress to attract guys. Darcy’s dress makes her intentions clear. She’s looking to find someone tonight, and it’s most

likely going to be one of my teammates.

“Is something wrong?” Darcy asks, coming up to me.

“No. Why?”

“You look tense.” She rubs my arm. “Did something happen?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m not tense. I’m fine.”

That’s a lie. My whole body tensed up when I thought about one of my teammates being with Darcy. Why am I acting like this? She’s not my girlfriend. We’re barely even friends.

“Do you like my dress?” she asks.

“Yeah, it’s nice.” I look away, because seeing her in that dress is making my cock hard. I can feel it pressing against my jeans.

She leans closer and lowers her voice. “Do you think Colton will like it?”

“He’s a guy, so yeah,” I say, sounding annoyed.

She backs away. “What does that mean?”

“He means you look hot,” Avery says, glancing at me. “Right Theo?”

My eyes go back to Darcy, moving up and down her body. “Yeah. You look hot.”

I say it without emotion, like I’m just stating a fact. If she were any other girl, I’d be taking her aside, telling her how much she’s turning me on in that dress and go from there. But I can’t do that with Darcy.

“It’s getting crowded in here,” Avery says, looking at how much the room has filled up.

“You might need to go on a beer run,” Wes says to me. “I don’t think we got enough.”

Being 21, I’m always the one buying the beer, but tonight someone else will have to do it. I’m not leaving Darcy alone in that dress. Shit, now I sound like her brother, which is not what I want. I don’t know what I want when it comes to her. Living with her has messed with my mind. I couldn’t even have sex with Erica. That night I went to her place, we started kissing but I kept thinking of Darcy so I left.

“Make one of the seniors do it,” I say, looking around the room for Darcy. She took off and now I can’t find her.

“Why?” Wes asks. “You always do it.”

“And I’m tired of it. Someone else can do it tonight.”

“What are you looking for?”

I look back at him. “Nothing. I thought I saw a girl from my accounting class but it wasn’t her.”

“I’m going to get something to eat,” Avery says to Wes.

“What happened to Darcy?” I ask Avery.

She shrugs. “She’s around here somewhere. Last I saw her she was walking over to Jayden.”

“A freshman? What the hell?” I scan the room, trying to find Jayden.

“You want anything?” Avery asks Wes.

“Not from the kitchen,” he says, giving her a kiss and grabbing her ass.

“You’ll get that later,” she says, smiling at him as she walks away.

“I don’t understand her,” I say to Wes.

“Who? Avery?”

“No. Darcy. First she wants Colton, then Eli, and now Jayden? The guy’s a freshman. He’s barely out of high school.”

Wes comes in front of me. “What’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been wired all night. Talking fast. Acting all jittery. Looking around the room. You on something?”

“No. You know I don’t do that shit.”

“Then what’s going on? Why are you acting like this?”

“I’m just stressed about going home.”

“I guess that makes sense. But you’re not going home for another week.”

“Yeah, well, I’m already stressing about it.” I spot Darcy across the room, talking to Marcus, a guy she dated last semester. “What the fuck’s he doing here?”

“Who?”

“Marcus. That guy who kept crashing our parties last semester.”

Wes looks over at him. “Darcy must’ve invited him. You told her she could invite people.”

“I meant girls, not guys. How does she know Marcus?”

“She used to date him.”

I look at Wes. “Are you serious? He’s not even her type.”

“How would you know her type?”

“She told me she likes athletes, and that guy is definitely not an athlete. I bet he can’t even throw a ball. Why’d they break up? Do you know?”

“Darcy just wasn’t into him, or that’s what she told Avery.”

“She must’ve changed her mind if she invited him to the party.”

“They’re just friends, and I don’t know if she invited him. He might’ve just shown up.”

“What’s Zane doing?” I watch as he goes up to Darcy. He’s a senior on the team. “Why is he talking to Darcy?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t. I just don’t know why she has to flirt with every guy on the team.” My jaw tightens as I see Zane putting his arm around Darcy and saying something in her ear.

“You sure this isn’t about something else?” Wes asks.

I force my eyes off Darcy and back to Wes. “What do you mean?”

“The way you’re acting tonight. You sure it isn’t about Darcy and not about you going home?”

I look at him. “Why would it be about Darcy?”

“You guys have been living together. Spending all your time together. Maybe you’re starting to have feelings for her.”

“For Darcy?” I laugh. “Not a chance. I told you, she’s like a sister. And she sees me like a brother.”

“Then why don’t you stop watching her and go find yourself a girl?” He smiles at someone behind me. “Hey, Rachel.”

I turn back and see Rachel coming up to me. We hooked up last year. Now we’re just friends.

“Hi, Wes.” She smiles at him, then turns to me. “Hey, Theo. I haven’t seen you for awhile.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s been a few months.”

She glances down at my body. “You look good.”

“I’m gonna go check on Avery,” Wes says, taking off.

Rachel gets in front of me. “You here with anyone?”

“No. How about you?”

She shakes her head, then steps closer, giving me a look that says she’s all mine if I want her. She’s hot and we had a good time when we hooked up, but she’s one of those girls who’s only interested in me because I play football.

“You want to go somewhere?” Rachel runs her tongue over her lips. “Somewhere more private?”

“I can’t. I’m on beer duty. If we run out, I have to get more.”

Why did I lie to her? She’s making it clear what she wants, and why wouldn’t I want that? I haven’t been with a girl for weeks. I could use some action.

“It wouldn’t take long.” She smiles. “You know, to catch up.”

What the hell? Why am I hesitating? I'm single, and Rachel is great in bed.

"Let's go." I take her hand and head toward the bedroom.

We pass Darcy on the way there, but I don't even look at her. Wes is right. I've been acting crazy tonight, keeping watch on Darcy like an overprotective big brother. I don't know why I was doing that. She can date whoever she wants.

"It's locked," I say when we get to the bedroom.

"Let's go to another one," Rachel says.

"There's only one other bedroom and Colton's using it. I saw him go in there a few minutes ago."

Darcy did too and looked disappointed. But what did she expect? I told her Colton sleeps around. Maybe now she'll finally believe me.

"What about the bathroom?" Rachel glances at it.

"There's only one. If we go in there, people will keep knocking on the door."

"Then we'll be quick." She grabs my hand, pulling me down the hall.

Darcy appears, stopping at the bathroom just as Rachel and I get there. "Sorry. Go ahead." Darcy notices me behind Rachel, then looks down at her hand in mine.

"You can use it," Rachel says to Darcy. "We're going to be awhile."

"Oh, um, thanks," Darcy says, glancing at me before going into the bathroom.

"Let's just go somewhere else," I say to Rachel. "We could go to my car."

"It's freezing out. What about your house?"

"I can't drive right now. I've been drinking."

"Then we'll just have to wait for one of the bedrooms." She leans back against the wall and pulls me down to her. "Until then..." She kisses me.

The bathroom door swings open and I hear Darcy say, "It's all yours."

When I look over, I see Darcy hurrying back to the party.

"Let's go," Rachel grabs my hand, but I yank it back.

"I can't. I need to go check on the beer."

"Seriously?" Rachel folds her arms over her chest. "What's wrong with you tonight? You'd normally be all over me by now."

"I'm just tired, I guess. Finals week wore me out."

"What are you saying? You don't want to do it?"

“Not tonight.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, but you’re not getting another chance.” She walks off, back to the party.

I remain in the hall, rubbing my face and wondering what the hell is wrong with me. I could be having sex right now and instead I’m standing outside the bathroom. Alone.

Eli appears in the hall and points to the bathroom. “You in line?”

“No. I was just leaving.”

As I pass him, he stops me. “Hey, what’s up with your roommate?”

“What do you mean?”

“Darcy. I got the feeling she was flirting with me, but I wasn’t sure if it was flirting or if she was just being friendly.”

“What was she doing?” I ask.

“Talking really close, smiling, touching my arm. Maybe she just gets that way when she’s drinking.”

“She asked me about you so I’m guessing she was flirting.”

He smiles. “You don’t care, right?”

“About what?”

“If I go out with her.”

“Why would I care?” I ask, my chest feeling tight.

He shrugs. “Maybe you want her for yourself.”

“She doesn’t see me that way. And we’re roommates. It’s never a good idea to date your roommate.”

“Yeah, I could see that. It could be awkward if things didn’t work out.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know how you do it, man.”

“Do what?”

“Be around her all the time and not have anything happen.”

“I told you, she doesn’t see me that way. She thinks of me like a brother.”

“What about you? You see her like a sister?”

“I see her as a roommate.”

“That’s it? You’re telling me you live with a girl that hot and never once thought about being with her?”

“No,” I say, but of course I’ve thought about it. How could I not? Darcy’s gorgeous and she walks around the house in stuff that shows off her body, like those tight shorts she wears to bed and t-shirts without a bra.

“So you’re good with me taking her home?” Eli asks.

My pulse spikes and my neck’s getting hot as I think about Eli with

Darcy. “You just met her. You’re not fucking sleeping with her.”

“Why do you care? You just said you’re not interested in her that way.”

“She wants a boyfriend.” I step up to him, getting in his face. “Is that what you want? A relationship? Because I can’t remember you ever being with a girl more than a night or two.”

He smiles a little. “So you DO like her.”

“No, I just don’t want you leading her on. She isn’t looking for a hookup. If that’s all you want her for, leave her alone.”

He backs away. “Hey, man, I’m not trying to fight with you. She’s off limits. I get it. I’ll just find someone else.” He walks past me, then turns back. “But if you want her, you better not wait. A girl like her isn’t going to be single for long.” He continues down the hall to the bathroom.

He’s right. It won’t be long before Darcy finds someone. I just hope it’s not a guy from the team. And it’s not because I want her for myself. She’s not even interested in me that way, which is good. We’re finally starting to get along as roommates. Getting involved with her would mess that up.

When I’m back at the party, Zane comes up to me. “What’s up with you and Darcy?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Eli said she’s off limits. Something about you wanting her for yourself.”

“I never said that. She’s my roommate. There’s nothing going on with us.”

“So you’re good if I take her home tonight?” He smiles a little, glancing at Darcy across the room.

I shove his arm. “You’re not taking her home. She wants a boyfriend, not a one-night stand.”

He looks at me, laughing a little. “So Eli was right. She’s off limits. I’ll tell the other guys.”

He walks over to Jayden, who has his eyes on Darcy as she makes her way through the crowded room. Zane gets Jayden’s attention and says something to him, probably that he needs to leave Darcy alone.

I could go over there and correct him, but I don’t. I already tried. I told him I wasn’t interested in Darcy but he didn’t believe me. Eli didn’t either.

Soon the whole team will think that Darcy’s off limits. She won’t get asked out tonight. She won’t be going home with anyone. And it’ll be partially my fault. But to be fair, I never said she’s off limits. I just didn’t say she wasn’t.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DARCY

“I TOLD you I’m not interested,” I say, shoving Marcus away.

“C’mon, baby,” he says, his words slurred. “It’ll be different this time. I promise.”

“We’re friends, Marcus. That’s it. Even when we went out, I didn’t see you as anything more than a friend. Now would you stop following me around and go find someone else?”

Marcus has been bothering me all night. We went out one time last semester and agreed we weren’t a good match. Then he sees me tonight and acts like I used to be his girlfriend and says he wants me back. He’s drunk, so I’m sure that’s part of the reason he’s acting like this, but it’s getting really annoying. And the more he drinks, the more aggressive he gets, putting his hands all over me and trying to kiss me.

I don’t even know why he’s here. The party’s hosted by the football team and I can’t imagine them inviting Marcus. He’s not friends with any of the players.

“Why don’t we go back to my place and talk?” Marcus says, putting his arms around my waist.

“No. And stop touching me.” I try to pull his arms away, but it only makes him tighten his grip. “Marcus, let me go.”

“You look so hot in that dress,” he says, giving me a drunk smile. He leans in to kiss me, but I turn away.

“Marcus, stop!” I push on his chest.

“Get away from her!” someone yells.

Looking to my right, I see Theo storming toward us, nostrils flared, face red, his eyes zeroed in on Marcus. He grabs the back of Marcus’ shirt and

yanks him away from me.

Marcus stumbles back, stunned, his eyes wide as he looks at Theo, who's now in front of Marcus, towering over him.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" Theo yells, glaring at Marcus.

"Nothing. I... I didn't do anything," Marcus stutters, holding his hands up in surrender.

Theo looks back at me. "What did he do?"

"He wouldn't let me go."

Theo turns back to Marcus and points to the door. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Marcus nods really fast and heads to the door.

"Hey!" Theo yells.

Marcus stops and looks back, not saying anything, like he's too afraid to speak.

Theo goes up to him. "You touch her again, you'll have my fist in your face. Understand?"

He nods. "Yeah. Got it."

Marcus hurries through the crowded room and leaves.

"You didn't have to do that," I say, walking up behind Theo.

Theo turns to me. "Did you invite him?"

"Marcus? No! I haven't even talked to him since classes ended. Why'd you think I invited him?"

"I didn't. Wes did. He said you and that guy used to date."

I roll my eyes. "We didn't date. We went out like one time and it was so boring I went home early."

"So why was he bothering you?"

"He saw me in this dress." I glance down at it. "He said I looked hot and that he wanted to go out with me again. He's been following me around all night, and the more he drank, the more aggressive he got." I shudder, feeling like Marcus is still touching me.

"You okay?" Theo asks, looking concerned as he wraps his hand gently around my arm. Instead of tensing up, like I did when Marcus touched me, Theo's touch calms me.

"I think I'm going to head home."

"It's only midnight."

"I know. I just feel like I need a shower after Marcus had his hands all over me." I shiver. "I don't know why, but that really got to me. When I told

him to stop and he wouldn't, I just... I don't know. I panicked." I laugh a little. "I'm overreacting."

"You're not overreacting." Theo leans down to me. "He should've let you go."

I nod, knowing he's right, but wishing I could've taken care of Marcus myself. I didn't want Theo to have to step in and save me.

"I'll take you home," he says.

"You've been drinking." I get out my phone. "I'll just call for a car."

"We'll go with Wes. He's not drinking tonight." He looks for him in the crowded room. "He's over there. C'mon."

I follow Theo to the other side of the room where Wes is talking to Zane and Lars, two seniors on the team.

"Hey," Wes says to Theo. "What happened with Marcus? I couldn't see."

"He wouldn't leave Darcy alone," Theo says. "He had his hands all over her so I kicked him out."

"Why is that guy always showing up at our parties?" Zane asks.

"I don't know," Theo says, "but it's not happening again. Any of us sees him at one of these parties, we're throwing him out."

"Wes, could you give me a ride home?" I ask.

"Sure." He looks at me with concern. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired. I'm ready to go home."

"Let me just text Avery," he says as he gets out his phone.

"I'm right here," Avery says, coming up beside Wes. "What's going on?"

"I'm taking Darcy home. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You're leaving?" Avery asks me.

"Yeah, I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

Avery comes over and takes my arm, leading us away from the guys. "What happened?"

"Marcus. He wouldn't leave me alone. He had his arms around me and wouldn't let go. I don't know why I got so upset about it. I'm in a room full of people. It's not like I was in danger. It just freaked me out when I couldn't get away from him."

"I get it," she says, rubbing my arm. "I would've felt the same way. I'll go back with you and we can watch a movie or talk."

"You don't have to leave the party. I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm just going to shower and go to sleep. We can talk tomorrow."

We walk back to the guys.

“Ready to go?” Wes asks.

“Yeah.”

“I’m going too,” Theo says.

I look at him. “Why? You don’t need to leave. Stay at the party.”

“I’m done with it. I’m ready to go.” He turns to Wes. “Can you take me to get my car in the morning?”

“I’ll drive you,” I say. “But Theo, are you sure you want to leave?”

“Let’s go,” he says to Wes, ignoring my question.

I don’t get it. Why is Theo leaving the party? He never leaves a party this early, unless it’s with a girl. And it’s always a girl he’s sleeping with, not his roommate.

Avery, Theo, and I all ride back with Wes to the house. Avery asks me again if I want her to stay, but I tell her to go back to the party with Wes. I tell Theo that too, but he insists on staying home.

“You should’ve gone back to the party,” I say as we go into the house. “All your teammates are there.” I go to the couch and take off my heels. “And what about that girl you were making out with in the hallway? Isn’t she going to be looking for you?”

“I told her I wasn’t interested,” Theo says from the kitchen. “You want pizza? I’ve got a couple in the freezer.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m starving.”

I look back and see him taking a pizza from the freezer. “So nothing happened? With that girl you were with?”

“No. We went out last year and it didn’t work out.” He turns on the oven. “How about you? Any news about Colton?”

“He forgot my name again,” I say with a sigh. “After hearing me say it. Twice.”

“It’s not about you. Colton’s really bad with names. He called me Noah for the first two weeks that I knew him.”

I laugh. “You don’t look like a Noah.”

“Yeah, I don’t know where he came up with that. Maybe because it’s another name with four letters? Who knows?” He puts the pizza in the oven and comes over to me. “What do you want to watch?”

I’d planned to go to bed, but now I kind of want to hang out with Theo. Why is he doing this? Why is he with me when he could be back at the party

with his friends?

“We could watch a movie.” I grab the remote and turn on the TV.

“As long as it’s not another romance. That one you made me watch last night was horrible.”

“It was good,” I say, glancing at him. “You’re just not romantic.”

“That movie was not romantic. The guy left her. Three times.”

“And kept finding his way back to her. That’s romantic.”

I’m surprised Theo watched that movie with me. All I’ve ever seen him watch is sports, but last night he joined me on the couch after I’d turned on the movie and stayed to watch the whole thing. Even Avery wouldn’t do that. She gets bored with romance movies and gives up halfway through.

“What about that one?” Theo says. “The one with the vampires.”

“I’ve seen that. It’s not a romance but there’s romance in it.”

“It’s listed under action films. Let’s watch that.”

I click on it, but pause it before it starts and turn to Theo. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Missing the party? Staying home with me? You didn’t need to do this. I told you I’m fine.”

“It’s not about that. I just didn’t feel like being at the party.”

“But why?”

“What difference does it make? Let’s just watch the movie.”

“Can I shower first? I feel gross after Marcus touched me.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

I run up to my room and take a quick shower. I come back downstairs and find Theo in the kitchen, looking in the oven.

“Is the pizza almost done?”

“Needs a few more minutes.” He shuts the oven door and does a double-take when he sees me. “Did you forget your shirt?”

I’m wearing a pink bralette and pink-and-gray striped pajama pants.

“It’s a bralette,” I say. “It’s like a shirt.”

“That is not a shirt,” he says, glancing at it before looking away. He goes to the cupboard to get a plate. “You should go put something on. You’re going to be cold.”

“Actually, I’m kind of hot. Did you turn up the heat?”

“Yeah, because you keep complaining it’s cold in here.”

“You can turn it down if you want.” I sit on the stool next to the counter.

“Could you grab me a soda?”

He takes one from the fridge and hands it to me, his gaze lowering to my chest. He blows out a breath and turns back to the oven.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“I just think you should cover up so you don’t get cold.”

“I’m not cold.” I open the soda, wondering why Theo’s being so weird about what I’m wearing. I’m sure his sister has worn bralettes around the house. And the one I have on covers a lot. It has this lacy part that almost goes down to my waist.

“You meet anyone else at the party?” Theo asks, leaning against the counter.

“I talked to Eli. He seemed like he wanted to go out with me, but then later he didn’t. I don’t know what happened.”

“He’s like Colton. He’s not looking for anything serious right now.”

“Or maybe it was the dress. It was too tight. I shouldn’t have been eating so much this week.”

“It wasn’t the dress. You looked gorgeous tonight. Every guy there was staring at you.”

“Then why didn’t anyone ask me out?” I spin my soda can around, watching as it circles over the countertop. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. Even when I find a guy, it doesn’t last. My longest relationship was two months, and he didn’t even call me his girlfriend.”

“Maybe you’re dating the wrong guys.” Theo grabs an oven mitt and takes the pizza from the oven, setting it on the stove.

“But how do you know that? How do you know the wrong guy from the right guy?”

“The right guy will want to get to know you. He’ll ask you stuff to know more about you, like what you like and don’t like.” Theo takes a knife from the drawer. “If a guy doesn’t try to get to know you, he’s only interested in your looks.”

“Guys don’t ask questions. Most of them barely talk.”

“I talk all the time,” Theo says as he cuts the pizza. “And I’m always asking you questions.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. You’re my roommate. You’re not trying to date me.”

“It shouldn’t matter. If a guy’s really interested in you, he’ll want to know more about you.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Why?”

“Because if that’s true, it means none of the guys I’ve dated were interested in me.”

“You sure you don’t want some?” He points to the pizza.

“No, I’m good. You want me to start the movie?”

“Go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I get the movie going, but Theo and I end up talking through most of it. He talks more than any guy I know, but I love that about him. I’m a talker, so Theo and I are a good match as far as roommates go. Avery was always telling me to be quiet so she could study. It’s not that we didn’t talk, but it had to be when she wasn’t studying, and she studied all the time.

“Darcy,” I hear Theo say.

Opening my eyes, I see the TV is off and I’m lying down. With Theo! He’s backed into the couch on his side with me in front of him. I can feel his warm chest on my back, his strong arm around my waist. It feels strange to admit this, but I kind of like being with Theo this way. I feel safe. Warm. Like I could fall back asleep.

I flip around to face him. “What happened?”

“We fell asleep. It’s almost seven.”

Theo looks adorable in the morning. His hair’s a mess and his usual big grin is more of a lazy smile.

“How did we end up lying down?”

“I don’t know. I just woke up and found you in front of me.”

“Do you remember turning the TV off?”

“No. Do you?”

“I don’t remember anything after that part of the movie where the vampires left town. Was that the end?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really watching it.” He moves his legs a little. “We should probably get up.”

“Yeah,” I mutter as my eyes fall shut.

“Darcy.” I open my eyes and see Theo looking back at me. “I need you to get up. Things are…” He glances down. And that’s when I feel it. Pressing against my leg. Something hard.

“Oh!” I quickly get up, glancing down at the bulge in his jeans.

“It’s a morning thing,” he says, getting up. “I just didn’t want you to… you know.”

“Yeah. Totally. I understand. I’m gonna go to my room.” I race to the stairs.

“You want breakfast?” Theo yells.

“No, I’m good,” I yell back as I hurry to my room.

This is bad. I slept with Theo. My roommate. The guy who’s supposed to be like a brother. Well, I didn’t actually sleep with him, but I slept next to him. And woke up in his arms. With his penis pressing against my leg!

And what’s even worse? I liked it! Not the penis on my leg part, but the other part.

Why is this happening? I can’t like Theo. After a week of spending almost all our time together, we’ve become friends, but it wasn’t supposed to become more. And it hasn’t. We just fell asleep on the couch. I’m overreacting. Everything’s fine.

After a long hot shower, I get dressed and am going down the hall when I hear Theo yelling from his room.

“Darcy, you out there?”

“Yeah, why?” I stop outside his room.

“There’s no hot water. How long was your shower?”

“Um, kind of long. Sorry.”

The door swings open and Theo walks past me, wearing only a towel. He heads to the stairs. “Maybe the pilot light on the water heater went out.”

“Can I help?” I ask, following him down the stairs.

“Yeah, you can take shorter showers,” he says, sounding annoyed.

“I said I was sorry.”

We go down to the basement, which isn’t finished and just has some boxes stacked up in the corner and a metal toolbox that I’m guessing belongs to whoever owns the house.

“It’s back here,” Theo says, stepping through some wall studs to the water heater. He bends down. “It’s still going.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s working, but the water needs time to heat.” As he stands up, his towel comes undone, pooling on the floor. He doesn’t even notice. He’s staring at me, his hands on his hips. “How the hell did you use 40 gallons of hot water?”

I don’t answer him. I can’t. I’m too focused on Theo, completely naked, with his penis right there in front of me. It’s big. Huge. And turning me on, which is wrong for so many reasons.

“Um, Theo,” I say, my eyes rising to his face. “You dropped your towel.”
He looks down at it. “Yeah? So? You didn’t answer me. How long was your shower?”

He doesn’t care that he’s standing there naked? What is with this guy? Does he not like clothes?

“It wasn’t that long. Maybe a half hour?” I turn away from him. “I’ll be upstairs.”

He follows me up the stairs, and when I turn back, I see the towel around him.

“I’ll just shower at the gym,” he says, going to the kitchen.

I walk over to him. “What’s the deal with you and clothes? You just don’t like them, or what?”

“I told you, I run hot. And now that I’ve cranked up the heat for you, I’m even hotter. I could walk around naked and still be hot.”

“But you can’t. You know that, right? You can’t just walk around naked.”

“Why?” He smiles a little. “Does it bother you?”

“Yes. I don’t need to see that.”

“What if I’m shirtless? Is that allowed?”

I clear my throat. “I’d rather have you wear a shirt.”

He folds his arms over his chest. “Then you can’t be wearing those bra things.”

“My bralettes? Why?”

“Because they’re not shirts. They don’t cover anything. It’s like you’re walking around shirtless.”

“You’re being ridiculous. Girls wear bralettes around the house all the time. Some even wear them in public.”

“If I can’t be shirtless, you can’t wear those bra things.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I head to the stairs and go up to my room. As I shut the door, I notice I’m out of breath. And it’s not from running up the stairs. It’s from seeing Theo naked. It’s got me all flustered, my heart going faster than it should.

I wish that hadn’t happened. I wish I hadn’t seen Theo naked. I’ll never get that image out of my head. And I’ll never think of Theo the same way.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEO

“I’LL GET the rest of it,” I say to Darcy as she unloads the groceries. “You stay inside. Keep warm.”

She takes off her coat as I go back out to the car, bracing against the bitterly cold wind and sleet that just started to fall.

It’s Thursday afternoon and the party’s in a few hours. Darcy’s been helping me get everything ready. If it were just me, I’d put out pizza, some bags of chips, and beer and call it done, but Darcy insisted on cleaning the house, getting a variety of food, and putting up holiday decorations since Christmas is just a few days away. The guys are going to give me shit about the decorations, but Darcy was so excited about putting them up that I didn’t have the heart to tell her no.

Things are back to normal with us after last weekend. We’re back to being friends instead of whatever we were last Sunday. She went from being my roommate to being the girl I spent the night with, in a way that almost felt more intimate than sex. She was in my arms, her body pressed against mine. I liked it a little too much, which really messed with my head. It must’ve messed with Darcy’s head too because she was acting strange the rest of the day. She got all formal with me, like we were strangers who just met. And she wouldn’t look at me. I think part of that is because she saw me naked when we were in the basement. I didn’t think it was a big deal. It’s not like she’s never seen a guy naked. And if she only thinks of me as a friend, then seeing me naked shouldn’t change anything between us. But it clearly made her uncomfortable because she avoided me for the rest of the day.

By Monday, she was starting to act normal around me again, and by Tuesday, we were back to how we were before, as if Sunday never happened.

But I haven't forgotten about it. I can't stop thinking about how it felt to have her in my arms, to sleep next to her, to wake up to those beautiful blue eyes looking back at me.

"This is it," I say, dropping the last of the grocery bags on the counter. "I'm going to go salt the driveway so people don't break a leg trying to get in the house. The sleet's starting to ice up."

"Good idea. I wouldn't have even thought about that."

"I've fallen enough times on the ice to know I'd rather not do it again so I always keep some salt in the garage for days like this."

"What do you think?" Darcy points to the red and green cookies we got at the store, which she arranged on a white tray with a bowl of red and green candies in the center.

"Looks nice," I say, smiling at her enthusiasm for something that'll be destroyed within minutes when the guys get here. They'll devour the cookies before even noticing how the tray was arranged. "I'll be outside if you need me."

"Okay," she says, picking up her phone. As I head to the door, I hear Christmas music playing and Darcy singing along.

She's really into the holidays. I would be too if I wasn't worried about what I'm going home to tomorrow. I've been avoiding my mom's calls all week, texting her instead so I don't have to hear how drunk she sounds on the phone.

At eight, people start arriving for the party. We won't have as big a crowd as usual since so many people have already left town, but I'm okay with that. I didn't want a huge party. I just wanted to hang out with my friends before we all leave for the holidays. It'll be weeks before I see them again.

"The place looks great!" Avery says as she comes into the house, noticing the lights Darcy put up, along with the Christmas tree. Avery wanted to help decorate, but she had to work this afternoon.

"Don't touch the food," I joke. "Darcy spent hours arranging it. It's only to look at, not eat."

"Ignore him," Darcy says, smiling at me. "I got mad at him for taking an olive from a tray and now he won't let it go."

"I didn't know you were so good at this stuff," Avery says, walking over to the counter where all the food is set out. "It looks great."

"Where's the beer?" Colton yells as he comes into the house.

"How about a hello first?" I kid, as he walks over to us. He went home a

few days ago and drove back for the party. I give him a shoulder hug. “How’s New York?”

“Good. Except my dads were arguing about how to decorate the tree so they each went out and got one. The apartment smells like a damn pine forest.”

Colton was raised by two dads who are both actors. They got married a few years ago and can’t agree on who gets to take over the home stuff, like decorating. They’re always arguing about it.

“I’d love having two trees,” Darcy says to Colton. “Do you have pictures?”

He gets out his phone and shows us.

“Wow,” Avery says. “Those are gorgeous. Your dads are really good at decorating.”

Eli comes in, laughing when he sees the Christmas tree and lights hung everywhere. “What the hell is all this? Am I in the right house?”

“Darcy did it,” I say, meeting him at the door. I lower my voice. “Don’t be a jerk about it. She spent a long time on it.”

“I’m just surprised you let her do it,” he says with a slight grin. “You two finally become more than just roommates?”

“No, and we won’t.”

“Yeah, okay,” he says, that smile still on his face.

“Dude, shut the door,” Wes yells at Eli. “It’s freezing out there.”

“Or leave it open so Theo doesn’t start walking around naked,” Darcy says. She looks at Wes. “Did he do that when you lived here?”

“Hell, no. I don’t need to see that shit. I see it enough in the locker room.”

“You walk around naked?” Colton says to me, laughing as he grabs some chips from the bowl.

“I’m not naked,” I say as Eli and I join everyone in the kitchen. “I’m just not fully dressed. It gets fucking hot in here. Darcy makes me turn the heat up.”

Zane walks in, followed by five other guys from the team. A few minutes later, more people arrive, and they keep coming until the living room is full and people are spilling into the kitchen. I wasn’t expecting so many people to show up. Half of them I didn’t invite, but I told the guys they could bring whoever they wanted.

A few hours into the party, I see Darcy talking to Zane, standing a little too close and smiling at whatever he’s saying. He’s smiling back and keeps

touching her arm. What the hell is he doing? He better not be asking her out.

I'm doing it again. Being possessive of a girl who's not mine. I always warn my sister to stay away from possessive guys and here I am, being all possessive of Darcy and I'm not even dating her.

Just before midnight, I'm getting another beer when I hear someone behind me. "Sorry I'm late."

Turning around, I see Erica, dressed in tight jeans and a low-cut black sweater. I didn't think she'd be here. I invited her but didn't think she was coming.

"Hey, glad you could make it," I say, opening my beer.

"I wanted to see you before you left for break." She smiles, a sexy smile that tells me she's here for more than the party. And showing up this late? She's making it clear what she wants.

"Sorry, but the food's mostly gone. All we've got left is beer and some holiday drink Darcy made. It's got vodka and cranberry juice and something else. You want to try it?"

"No, thanks." She steps closer to me. "I didn't come for the refreshments."

I glance across the room and see Darcy watching me with Erica. When I catch her, she quickly looks away.

"So what time are you leaving tomorrow? Not too early, I hope." Erica gives me that smile again and runs her hand down my chest.

"I can't tonight," I blurt out, but then wonder why the hell I said it. I'm single. Erica's hot. And I haven't had sex in weeks.

"What do you mean, you can't?" She takes a step back. "Are you seeing someone?"

"No, I just have a long drive tomorrow. I need to get some sleep."

"Your family lives in Philly. That's like two hours away."

"The weather's bad. It's going to take longer than that."

She puts her hands on her hips. "If you don't want to do this, just tell me. Don't make up some stupid story."

"Theo!" Colton yells. I look over and see him at the door with a girl. "I'm heading out. Have a good break."

"Yeah, you too."

He leaves and my gaze moves to Darcy, who's making her way across the room to the stairs. Why is she going upstairs? Is she going to bed already? She didn't even say goodbye to Avery.

“What are you looking at?” Erica asks.

“I need to check on something.”

“Now? We’re talking.”

“It’ll just take a minute.” I go around her.

“I’m leaving!” she yells, like she thinks that’ll make me come back.

It doesn’t. I make my way across the room and go upstairs.

“Darcy?” I knock on her door. “Are you coming back down?”

She opens the door. “I just need a little break. It’s really crowded down there and I was getting hot.”

“I’ll turn the heat down.”

“I’ll be down later. Go back to the party.”

She starts to close the door, but I hold it open. “Is something wrong?”

“Theo, I’m fine. Just go back to the party.”

“This isn’t about Erica, is it?”

“No.” She laughs, but it’s one of those nervous, uncomfortable laughs. “I don’t care who you sleep with. It’s none of my business.”

“Erica left.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, so come back to the party. People are starting to leave and I’m going to need help cleaning up.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s why you came up here? To get me to help you clean up?”

“If you don’t want to help, just keep me company.” I take her hand. “C’mon. It’s our last night before break. You don’t want to spend it up in your room.”

She comes downstairs with me. We see Wes and Avery putting their coats on and walk over to them.

“You’re leaving?” Darcy asks Avery.

“We want to get an early start tomorrow.” She hugs Darcy. “Have a good Christmas.”

“You too.”

“See ya,” Wes says to me. “Call anytime if you want to talk.”

I nod, knowing he’s referring to the issues with my mom.

Wes and Avery leave, followed by some of the guys, and an hour later, the place is cleared out.

“The party ended earlier than I thought it would,” Darcy says as she tosses the empty beer bottles into the recycling bin.

“It’s because most people are leaving town in the morning.” I hold up an empty vodka bottle. “And because we ran out of alcohol.”

Darcy takes something from under the sink. “I saved one.” She holds up a bottle of tequila. “In case we wanted it while we were cleaning up.”

“Our own private party,” I say, taking the bottle from her. “I like it.” I grab some plastic cups and pour us each some tequila. I hand her a cup, then hold up mine up for a toast. “To a successful party and another semester done.”

We drink to it, then I put on some music and we get to work picking up trash. By the time I take the last of the garbage bags out to the garage, it’s almost two in the morning and we still have to clean the floors and wipe down the countertops.

“Let’s finish this tomorrow,” I say.

“Just let me put this away.” Darcy reaches up to put a bowl in the cupboard and ends up dropping it, stumbling forward as she goes to catch it.

I grab her before she falls. “I think you’re done for tonight.”

“I broke it,” she says, staring at the pieces of glass on the floor.

“Because you’re tired. We both are. Let’s go to bed.”

“I have to clean it up.”

“We’ll do it tomorrow.”

We go upstairs and Darcy stops just outside my room. “I had fun tonight.”

“Yeah, it was good. Thanks for helping me get everything ready.”

“Thanks for letting me put up the decorations. I know it’s not what you wanted.”

I shrug. “I didn’t mind. The guys gave me shit for it, but whatever. I don’t listen to them.” I look away, then back at her. “So did you have any luck tonight?”

“With what?”

“Did any guys ask you out?”

“No.” She sighs and leans back against the wall. “I can’t figure it out. Guys flirted with me, but none of them even asked for my number. Is it me? Did I do something wrong?”

“It’s not you. Stop worrying about it.”

She looks down at herself. “Maybe it’s my outfit. Red’s not my color.”

My gaze drops to the silky red shirt she’s wearing. It’s long sleeve and tied in front with this long ribbon that looks like she’s waiting to be

unwrapped. That's the first thing I thought when I saw her in it. Like I wanted to unwrap her. The shirt is tied just under her breasts, exposing her stomach. She wore it with a short black skirt and thigh-high black boots. She looks fucking hot. Guys were checking her out all night, including me. Every time I saw her, I found it hard to look away.

"It's not your outfit. You look great."

"Really?" Her eyes lift to mine. "Or are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

"I'm saying it because it's true. You look hot. If you weren't my roommate, I'd—" I stop, wishing I hadn't said that.

"You'd what?"

"Doesn't matter." I glance at her room. "You should get to bed."

Looking back at her, I see her gaze moving up and down my body. I notice her chest rising and falling as she breathes. Her lips parting.

Why is she looking at me like that? She's always saying she sees me like a brother, but that is not how you'd look at your brother.

Why is she still standing here? Why isn't she going to her room?

I rest my hand on the wall above her head and lean over her. "Go to your room."

She looks up at me. "No."

"Why?"

"I don't want to."

"You need to. It's late. Go."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm not going to stand here all night arguing with you."

She doesn't move, and doesn't say anything.

"Darcy, go to your room."

"No." A slight smile slides up her face.

I don't know if it's anger, frustration, or my insane attraction to her, but she's making my damn blood boil. I feel like I'm burning up inside, and my heart's pumping faster by the second.

"You drive me fucking crazy," I say, my eyes locked on hers. "Why won't you just go to your room?"

"I'm not ready to."

"You need to go. Now. If you don't, shit's going to happen."

"Like what?"

I glance down at her tits peeking out of her shirt. "Just go to your fucking

room.”

“Why are you getting so angry?”

“I’m not angry. I’m—” I take a breath.

“You’re what?” she asks in a flirty tone.

“Darcy, I mean it. Just go.”

“Or what? What are you going to do?”

She’s testing me. She knows damn well what could happen and still won’t go to her room. I don’t understand why she’s doing this, but I’m too far gone to question it.

I lean down and kiss her, and not a gentle, hesitant kiss, but the kind that lets her know how much she turns me on. How much I want her. How much I’ve held back, wanting to do this, but knowing I shouldn’t.

Darcy kisses me back with the same intensity, like she wanted this as much as I did. Why didn’t she tell me that? If she liked me this way, why has she been trying to date my teammates instead of me?

We can talk about that later. Right now, I don’t fucking care.

Backing away from her, I point to my room. “Get in there.”

She smiles. “You told me to go to my room.”

“And now I’m telling you to go to mine.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“You wouldn’t have kissed me like that if you didn’t.”

She goes in my room and I shut the door. My eyes drop to her blouse. I wrap my hand around the long red tie and yank on it, causing the silky fabric to fall open, exposing her bare tits.

She gasps and covers her chest, but then smiles a little. “I think you ripped it.”

“I’ll buy you a new one.” I take her hands, pulling them away from her chest so I can see her tits. I’ve gotten glimpses of them in those loose shirts she wears to bed but now I’m seeing all of them.

“They’re small,” she mutters, looking down.

“They’re perfect.” I lean down and suck on her tit, for just a moment, giving her a taste of what’s to come. “Turn around.” When she does, I unzip her skirt. “Take it off.”

She shimmies out of it, leaving her in a red lace thong. I smack her ass and hear her suck in a breath.

I lean down to her ear. “You like that?”

She nods, her breaths getting faster.

“Lay down on the bed.”

She turns to me. “What if I don’t want to?”

“There’s the door.” I point to it. “You’re free to go.”

She backs up to the bed and lays across it, her legs facing me. I grab hold of her boot and tug it off, then do the same with the other one.

Wrapping my hands around her ankles, I slide her to the edge of the bed. She sits up and reaches for my belt. I watch as she takes it off, then unzips my jeans. I shove them to the floor, then cup her face with my hands and kiss her, my tongue going past her lips.

I kneel down, break from her lips, and slide off her panties. With my eyes on hers, I shove open her legs. She falls back on her forearms, then watches as I put my mouth on her. A moan comes from her lips as my tongue circles over her clit. She falls back on the bed, her hips rising and falling.

“Hold still,” I tell her, holding her thighs down.

Her body relaxes and I slide a finger in her, then another.

“Oh God,” she whispers as my tongue works over her clit, my fingers pumping in and out of her.

She grabs hold of the comforter, fisting it in her hand as her breaths get faster. She’s close. Almost over the edge.

My fingers plunge deeper inside her as my tongue moves faster. She arches back, her body trembling as she comes. I watch her, loving that I made her feel that way.

As I stand up, I look at her on the bed, her eyes shut, her lips parted, her body on display for me. She’s fucking beautiful.

Her eyes open and she sees me gazing at her. She smiles a little as she moves over on the bed. I take off what’s left of my clothes and lie beside her. She turns to me and I wrap my arm around her and kiss her.

“If we do this,” I whisper over her lips, “there’s no going back. It’ll change things between us.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

I look at her. “But it will. You know it will. You really want to do this?”

She answers by kissing me, and not a gentle kiss, but a hard, deep kiss that tells me she wants this. And there’s no way I’m turning her down.

CHAPTER NINE

DARCY

I DON'T KNOW what's happening. This is not the Theo I know. It's not the guy I've been living with for two weeks. Or if it was, I was all wrong about him. I imagined him being gentle in bed, and maybe a little hesitant. He's been so cautious around me since I moved in. He's had plenty of chances to make a move, but he hasn't. Not once.

But tonight, he's bold, aggressive, taking charge in a way I didn't think was possible with him. He's always so laid back. I assumed he'd let me take the lead, but instead he's ordering me around, taking control, and being kind of rough with me. But in a good way. Like when he smacked my ass? I loved it. Maybe it's too soon to say this, but I trust Theo. I know he wouldn't hurt me.

He kisses me, his body moving over mine, forcing me onto my back. He doesn't even have to speak to get me to do what he wants. He's so big and muscular that when he moves, I have to move with him.

"Stay there," he orders as he reaches over to the nightstand.

I'm shocked at how aggressive he's being. Maybe it's the alcohol making him this way. It's definitely made me more aggressive. I wouldn't be doing this if I hadn't had those shots of tequila. I've thought about it. Had dreams about it. And one night I almost kissed him just to see what it'd be like. But I didn't have the courage to do it, or do any of the things I thought of doing with him. Tonight I do.

Watching Theo at the party in that tight black shirt he had on, smelling his cologne every time he walked by, seeing him smiling at me across the room—it got to me. I felt all hot and tingly inside, and then the image of him naked kept flashing through my mind. I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to

kiss him, and the alcohol made me want to do even more.

Is it wrong to do this with Theo? Probably. Okay, yes, but I'm at a point where I can't say no. My inhibitions are down and the sexual tension between Theo and me is so intense it's been hard to be around him. Maybe if we do this, we can relieve the tension and go back to just being roommates.

I watch as he rolls the condom on. His dick is huge. I'm a little worried it's going to hurt. He lowers down and I feel the tip of him start to enter me.

"I'll go slow," he says over my lips as if he knew what I was thinking. He sinks in a few inches and I feel myself stretching to fit him. But I like it. It feels good.

"Keep going," I tell him.

He sinks deeper, holding himself up on his arms so he doesn't crush me. He kisses me, then fills me all the way. He pauses a moment, then slowly pulls out.

"You okay?" he whispers.

"Yeah." I open my eyes and see him looking back at me.

"Then it's time for the fun part."

"What does that mean?" I ask, slightly concerned.

"It means I get to make you come again."

"Oh, um, that doesn't happen with me."

He smiles a little, then his lips press to mine as he sinks into me, deep as he can go. He pulls back and presses on my knees until they're splayed out on the bed. He slides his hands under me, grabbing my ass and lifting it slightly as he sinks into me again. It feels different this time, more intense, and like he's buried inside me, deeper than any guy's ever been. He thrusts in and out of me, getting into a rhythm. I feel that tingly sensation again, that pleasurable ache, the tension building inside me. But there's no way it could happen again. I've never come twice in a row. Except it feels like I might.

"Oh my God," I pant as Theo moves faster. He sits up on his knees, his eyes locked on mine as he pumps in out of me, hard and deep. The sensations keep building. I'm close. Really close. Theo rubs his thumb over my clit and I'm gone. Over the edge.

Theo lowers back over me and keeps going, his muscles tightening. He thrusts into me once, twice, and on the third time, he comes, his arms trembling as he holds himself up. He takes a few breaths, then pulls out of me and collapses on the bed.

The room is silent, neither of us saying anything. What do we do now?

What does this mean?

Theo gets up and goes into the bathroom.

I'm so relaxed, so exhausted, that I fall asleep before he comes back.

I WAKE up to bright light coming through the blinds. I look around and realize I'm not in my bed. I'm in Theo's. The bed moves and I feel a heavy arm drape over me. Theo's arm. I'm in bed with Theo. My roommate. Shit! That really happened? I thought I might've dreamed it. Sex that good couldn't be real, especially not with Theo. Could it?

Moving Theo's arm off me, I turn to him and shake his shoulder. "Theo. Wake up."

He mumbles something.

"Theo. It's morning. Get up."

He blinks open his eyes and sees me there. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. Who cares? Did we, um... do something last night?"

"Yeah." His eyes open more and he looks at me with concern. "You don't remember?"

"I think I do. I just wasn't sure it really happened."

"It did." He smiles a little. "It definitely did."

I slip my hand under the sheet. I'm naked. In bed. With Theo.

"What happened to my clothes?"

"You took them off." He smiles again. "I might've helped with that."

"Why didn't you put them back on?"

"Because you were dead asleep when I came out of the bathroom."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Because you needed to sleep."

"Where are my clothes?" I ask, looking around.

"On the floor. Why are you freaking out?"

I look at him. "Because I'm naked!"

"Yeah? So? You were naked last night when we—"

"Let's not talk about that." I kick at the sheets, trying to free my feet so I can get up.

"Hey." Theo's arm goes around my waist. "What's going on? Are you trying to pretend last night didn't happen?"

“That’s a good idea. Let’s do that.” I pull away from him, but he keeps hold of me.

“Darcy, stop. Look at me.”

I turn to face him. “What?”

“I thought you wanted last night to happen. I asked you if you did. And I made it clear you could go if you changed your mind.”

“I know,” I say, looking down. “And I did want it to happen. I’m just not sure it was the best idea.”

“Are you saying you regret it?”

“I’m saying it wasn’t a good idea. We’re roommates. That’s not supposed to happen.” I try to pull away from him. “Let me go. I need to get ready.”

He takes his arm off me and I grab the comforter, wrapping it around my body as I get out of bed.

“Why are you covering up?” Theo asks. “I’ve already seen you without clothes.”

I race out of the room, not answering him. I go into my room and straight to the bathroom to shower. I need to get out of here. I was going to wait until later today to drive home, but I can’t be around Theo right now. I need to leave and think about where we go from here. Can we really go back to being just roommates after what we did?

“Darcy.” Theo knocks on my door as I’m zipping up my suitcase.

“Hey.” I open the door, my suitcase beside me. “Have a nice Christmas.”

“You’re leaving? Now?”

“Would you mind taking this downstairs?” I hold out my suitcase. “I have to grab my other bag.”

“It’s only 10. I thought you weren’t leaving until this afternoon.”

“I changed my mind. I want to get home before it starts snowing.”

“Is that really the reason, or is it something else?”

“I’ll just take it myself,” I say, setting the suitcase down as I go back in my room to grab my backpack. When I return to the door, I see Theo going down the hall with my suitcase. I follow him downstairs. “You can just leave it at the door.”

He waits for me as I put on my coat. He hasn’t showered yet and his hair’s a mess from last night, but in a sexy tousled way. And he’s got a thick layer of stubble on his face from not shaving all week. He looks really hot, which is another reason I need to get away from him.

“What’s going on here?” he asks as I meet him at the door. “Why are you

racing off like this?”

“It’s the weather. I just heard the forecast and if I don’t leave now, I’ll be driving in snow.”

I totally made that up, but I needed an excuse to leave.

Theo puts his hand on my shoulder. “You sure that’s all it is? I feel like you’re running out on me because of what happened.”

“No, not at all,” I say, flinging my scarf around my neck. “I just don’t like driving in snow.” I open the door. “Bye, Theo.”

As I go to grab my suitcase, Theo takes it, along with my backpack. “I’ll walk you out.”

“It’s freezing outside and you’re not wearing a coat.”

“I’m good,” he says, following me out to my car. The wind’s blowing and there’s snowflakes in the air. I’m already cold and I’m bundled up in my winter coat and scarf with a hat on my head. Theo’s wearing jeans and a t-shirt.

“Get inside,” I say, shivering as I open the car door. “Before you freeze to death.”

He shuts my trunk and walks over to me. “Can I call you during the break?”

“I’ll be busy with family stuff and so will you. Why don’t we just—”

“Darcy, stop acting like this.”

“Like what?”

“All awkward and shit. What we did last night doesn’t have to change anything. If that’s what you want.”

“I think that’d be best,” I say, looking back at my car. “I should really get going. It’s already starting to snow.”

“Let me know you got home safe.”

“I’ll send you a text.” I get in the car. “Bye, Theo. Have a good break.”

I get in the car and shut the door. As I drive away, I look back in the mirror and see Theo going back in the house. He almost seemed disappointed I didn’t want last night to turn into anything, but why would he want that? He’s never expressed interest in dating me and we both agree that dating your roommate is a bad idea. Maybe I’m reading him wrong. I’m sure Theo feels the same way I do—that we need to forget last night ever happened.

But as I’m driving home, it’s all I can think about. Theo was like a different guy last night. Bold. Domineering. Aggressive. I guess he’s that way on the football field, but at home he seems like a kid who just wants to

sit around playing video games all day. Or maybe that's just how I've been choosing to see him when the reality is there's more to him than that.

Why am I even thinking about this? It's like I'm trying to justify why it'd be okay for me to date Theo when I already know it's a terrible idea.

When I reach my parents' house, I notice how plain it looks compared to every other house on the street. There's no sign it's the holidays. They don't have lights hung or even a wreath on the door. They both work a lot so I get they don't have time to decorate, but sometimes I wish they made time for stuff other than their jobs, like me. They never had time for me growing up so I spent a lot of time alone.

"Mom?" I say, going into the house. It's a large two-story house that's sparsely decorated because my parents don't like clutter. They have some expensive paintings on the wall and a glass bowl adorning the coffee table, but other than that, the house is just furniture. It's cold and uninviting, which is why I always hung out in my room. It's filled with photos and colorful blankets and pillows and has strings of lights hanging behind my bed. My parents hate it, but they agreed to let me decorate my room the way I want as long as I keep the door shut.

"You're home," my mom says, coming down the stairs and giving me a hug. She looks thinner than the last time I saw her and has on more makeup than she normally wears. "How was the drive?"

"It was okay." I look around. "Where'd you put the tree this year?"

"We decided not to get one. It's such a hassle dealing with getting it home and then the mess of the needles everywhere. We decided it'd be best to just skip it this year. Are you hungry?" she asks, taking off for the kitchen. "I have leftovers from last night in the fridge."

"I can wait until dinner." I watch as she fills a kettle with water. "So we're not having a tree for Christmas? Not even a fake one?"

She puts the kettle on the stove. "Honey, you know how I feel about artificial trees. They're tacky and have to be stored from year to year. Your father and I have been clearing out what's in storage. We don't want to add to it."

"Why are you clearing stuff out?"

She turns to me and shrugs. "We just thought it was time." She hurries over to the fridge and opens it. "Are you sure you don't want something to eat?" She holds out a takeout bag. "These stuffed shells were wonderful. I just wasn't able to finish them."

“You went to Sortini’s last night? I thought Dad didn’t like that place.”

“He didn’t go. I went with a friend.” She puts the food back and shuts the fridge door. “Do you need some help getting your things from the car?”

“I can do it. I just have my suitcase, backpack, and some presents.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” she says, biting her lip.

“Tell me what?”

She walks over to me. “We decided not to do presents this year. I was going to tell you when you got home. I didn’t realize you’d already gone shopping.”

“Of course I went shopping. Christmas is in two days,” I say, getting angry. “Mom, what is going on? You don’t have a tree. You don’t want to do presents. It’s like we’re not even having Christmas.”

“Your father and I don’t see a need to make a big fuss of it this year. You’re not a little girl anymore. You don’t need presents or silly decorations. What’s important is that you’re here with us.”

“I’m gonna go get my stuff,” I say, taking off for the door.

“Honey, don’t be upset,” she calls after me. “It’s just one day.”

It’s not just a day. It’s Christmas. A major holiday. A time when people hang pretty lights and put up a tree and have cookies baking in the oven. My mom doesn’t get it. She’s never been into holidays, but she’d at least let us have a Christmas tree. This year we’ll have nothing, not even presents, other than the ones I got for my parents.

Going back inside, I leave the presents in the entryway and take my bags up to my room. My jaw drops when I open the door and see that all my photos that were tacked to the wall are gone and all the decorative stuff I had on my shelves and dresser have been packed away in boxes that are lined up on the floor. The shelves aren’t even there anymore.

“Mom!” I yell, angry that she did this without telling me.

“Darcy, just calm down,” she yells back. I hear her coming up the stairs.

“Why did you do this?” I ask as she joins me in my room. “Why didn’t you at least wait for me to get home?”

“Everything is still here. You can go through the boxes and decide what you’d like to keep. We can either get you a storage locker or you can take it back to college with you.”

“Why are you in such a hurry to clean out my room? Are you turning it into something?”

Her phone rings from downstairs. “I need to check that. Why don’t you

get settled and we can talk later?” She leaves, racing back downstairs.

I shut the door and lay down on my bed. At least my parents kept my bed, although that’ll probably be gone soon too. I’m okay with my parents wanting to use my bedroom for something else. I just wish they’d told me before packing away all my stuff. My bedroom was the only warm and homey place in the entire house and now it’s just as cold and drab as the rest of the rooms. Couldn’t my parents have at least waited until after Christmas to do this?

My phone rings. I pick it up and see Theo’s name on the screen.

“Hey, Theo.”

“Hey, did you make it home?”

“Yeah, sorry I forgot to send a text.”

“Everything okay? You sound sad.”

How does he know that? Even my parents can’t tell when I’m sad, so how does Theo know, after just a couple weeks with me?

“I’m just disappointed,” I say. “My parents didn’t want a tree this year so it doesn’t really feel like Christmas.”

“You should’ve brought the one you had here.”

“My mom wouldn’t allow it. She hates fake Christmas trees.”

“What about lights? You could put some around the house like you did for the party. Despite all my complaining about it, I really liked what you did. The place looked great.”

“Thanks,” I say, feeling myself smiling. I kind of miss Theo, which is strange because it’s only been a few hours since I saw him. Maybe I just miss being at college. Being here doesn’t feel like home anymore, especially with my room like this.

“You’re really quiet,” Theo says. “Are you okay?”

“My mom packed up my room. Everything’s in boxes. It feels weird being here when it’s like this.”

“She didn’t tell you she was doing it?”

“No. She probably thought it’d upset me, but it’s even more upsetting to come home and see everything in boxes.”

“Why’d she do it? She just wanted the extra space?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say.” I sigh as I stare up at the ceiling. “It’s not going to be a good Christmas this year. My mom said we’re not even doing presents.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks. You want to come to my house for Christmas?”

he asks, a smile in his voice. “My mom hires a decorator. The house always looks like a scene on a Christmas card. We usually have three trees, sometimes four.”

“I’d love to see that,” I say, trying to imagine it.

“I’ll send you some pictures. Oh, and we always have piles of presents. My mom spends way too much. And she and my sister spend an entire day baking cookies, all different kinds.”

“That’s the kind of Christmas I’ve always wanted. You’re really lucky.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he mutters.

“What’s wrong? Why don’t you sound happy about it?”

“It’s just... family stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. I should let you go. I just wanted to check that you made it home okay.”

“Theo, wait.” I sit up.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“Can we talk a little more? I’m feeling really down right now and could really use a friend.”

The phone is silent a moment, then I hear Theo again. “We can talk as long as you want.”

I could’ve ended the call and called one of my other friends, but there’s something about Theo that makes me feel calm and like everything will be okay. As much as he annoys me as a roommate sometimes, he’s becoming a really good friend. I was worried last night might’ve changed things between us, but it hasn’t. I need to keep it that way, which is why we need to stick with being roommates and nothing more.

CHAPTER TEN

THEO

“MAYBE YOU COULD TRY TALKING to your mom,” I say to Darcy. “Just explain how you feel, like what you just said to me.”

“It’s easier talking to you than to her. She’ll tell me I’m being dramatic and that change is a part of life. We’re so different that way. I’m ruled by my emotions and my mom’s not emotional at all. Sometimes I think she doesn’t even have emotions.”

“She does. She just doesn’t show them. Some people are like that. Like Wes. The guy never shows emotion, except maybe around Avery.” I go into my room to get my suitcase from the closet, but it’s not there. “Hey, have you seen my suitcase?”

“You haven’t left yet?”

“No. I haven’t even packed.” I notice my suitcase is already by the bed. “Found it.”

“Theo, it’s going to be dark soon.”

“I don’t mind driving in the dark.”

“But it’s snowing. The roads could be bad.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m used to driving in snow.”

“I thought you were already home. You should’ve told me you had to go instead of listening to me complain for two hours.”

“You weren’t complaining. You were upset. You needed to talk it out.”

“If I knew you hadn’t left, we could’ve talked later.”

“Darcy, don’t worry about it. I’m not in a rush to get home.”

“I would be if I were you. The way you described it, it sounds like you’ll be going home to the perfect Christmas.”

“Yeah, not quite,” I mutter

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“It’s not nothing. You keep making comments that you don’t want to go home.”

“I do. I just don’t know what I’m going to find when I get there.”

“What does that mean? You think your parents packed up your room like mine did?” She laughs a little.

“No,” I say in a serious tone, feeling my chest tighten. It happens every time I think of my mom, and gets even worse when I’m about to see her. I never know what to expect. Will I get the mom who’s sober enough to talk to me and walk straight? Or will I get the mom who’s stumbling into things and slurring her words?

“What are you worried about?” Darcy asks. “Why don’t you want to go home?”

“It’s my mom,” I say, deciding to just tell her. I haven’t yet because I didn’t want Darcy to know. I’m not sure why. I’m usually open about it. I even joke about it, like having a drunk mom isn’t a big deal. Maybe that’s why I haven’t told Darcy, because I know she’ll see through my bullshit and know it’s a bigger deal than I’m making it sound.

“What about her?” Darcy asks.

“She drinks too much. It’s hard to be around her.”

“A lot of people drink too much at the holidays.”

“It’s not just the holidays. It’s all the time and I think it’s getting worse.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. It is what it is. I just don’t like being around her when she’s drunk. I won’t even spend the summers there anymore. It’s too hard seeing her that way.”

“Why do you think it’s getting worse?”

“Ever since she went to her high school reunion last year, she’s been drinking more, or that’s what my dad said.”

“You mean your stepdad?”

“I don’t call him that. He’s the only dad I know.”

“So what happened at your mom’s reunion?”

“People were asking her about her old boyfriend, my biological dad. She dated him all through high school until he knocked her up senior year and took off. She never got over it. She thought they’d get married and live happily ever after and instead he left her with no money, no place to live, and

an infant to care for. If I ever find the bastard, I'm gonna kill him."

"You don't mean that."

"Okay, maybe I won't kill him, but I'd definitely bash his face in. He needs to feel some serious pain for what he's put us through. It's been over 20 years and my mom is still fucked-up because of him."

"And she has no idea what happened to him?"

"Only that he joined the military, but she heard that from a friend. She doesn't know if it's true." I check the time. "I should probably get on the road. It's getting late."

"Yeah, go ahead. I hope everything's okay when you get there."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Have a good holiday."

"You too. Bye, Theo."

It's after four. I should've left hours ago, but I kept putting it off, not feeling ready to deal with my mom. Her drinking is the reason I've never liked Christmas. Even as a kid, I dreaded it because I knew she'd get really drunk and yell at us or pass out. She yells when she's drunk so it's actually better if she just goes to bed and sleeps it off.

As I'm driving home, my mind goes to Darcy and what we did last night. I don't regret it, but it's going to make living with her a lot harder than it was before. Every time I see her, I'll think about what we did. She's not even near me and I'm thinking about it. So how is this going to work? I can't avoid her when we live in the same house.

Maybe after three weeks apart, we'll have moved past it and can go back to how we were before it happened. When we talked on the phone today, she didn't seem awkward or uncomfortable like she did this morning.

My phone rings and I hit the answer button on the steering wheel.

"Hey, Wes," I say, seeing his number on the screen.

"Hey, I'm just checking in. How's it going with your mom?"

"I'm still driving. I just left. I was kind of putting off going there."

"I know what you mean. I used to do the same thing. If I wasn't spending the holidays with Avery this year, I would've stayed in town. There was no way I was spending another holiday with my family."

"You don't think you ever will?"

"Not if I can avoid it. Hey, so what happened last night? I thought you had something going on with Erica, but then I saw her leaving."

"Yeah, it didn't work out."

"So were you alone last night, or did you end up with someone else?"

I keep quiet, not sure I should tell him.

“You still there?” Wes asks.

“Yeah.” I should fess up. He’ll find out anyway when Darcy tells Avery. “If I tell you this, keep it between us. I don’t think she wants people knowing, other than Avery, and she knows Avery will tell you, so it’s not like this is a secret.”

“Wait, you’re not saying you and Darcy—”

“Yeah, we did. And I know it was a bad idea, but it didn’t feel like it at the time, if you know what I mean.”

“Wait, hold on. I need a minute to wrap my mind around this. You’re talking about Darcy, as in Avery’s old roommate? The girl who thinks you’re immature and messy and hates that you spend hours playing video games? That Darcy?”

“I know, it doesn’t make sense. But what’s even crazier is that *she* came onto *me*.”

“No fucking way. How much did she drink last night?”

“She’d been drinking, but she wasn’t drunk.”

“Then how the hell did this happen?”

“It just did. We were cleaning up after the party, went upstairs, and instead of going to her room, she stopped outside of mine. I told her to go to her room, but she wouldn’t do it. It’s like she wanted something to happen. I wanted that too, but I didn’t think we should. I kept telling her to go, but she refused. Then next thing I know, we’re in my bed.”

“How the hell do you go from arguing all the time to having sex?”

“We haven’t been arguing, at least not as much. We’re actually starting to be really good friends.”

“Okay, but I still don’t get how this happens. Darcy always says she sees you like a brother.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t last night, or when she saw me the other day when my towel fell off. Honestly, I felt something between Darcy and me since the day she moved in, but I tried to ignore it. I thought maybe it was just me—that Darcy didn’t feel the same way—but it turns out she did.”

“Are you talking about attraction or something else?”

“Attraction for sure, and maybe something else. I don’t know. I just know I can’t act on it. If Darcy and I dated and it didn’t work out, how would we keep living together? She’d want to move out and there’s nowhere to go.”

“Did you guys talk about it after it happened?”

“No, she fell asleep. And when she woke up, she took off to go home. But I talked to her about an hour ago and everything seemed back to normal.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you? There’s no way you two can go back to how things were before this happened.”

“Why not? It’s just sex. I’ve had sex with girls and gone back to being friends with them.”

“But this is someone you live with, someone you see every day. You really think it won’t bother you if you see her with Eli or Zane or one of the other guys on the team?”

My muscles tense up as he says it. I don’t want those guys dating Darcy. I don’t even want to think about it.

“You see what I mean?” Wes says when I don’t respond. “That shit hasn’t even happened yet and you’re already getting pissed about it.”

“I’m not pissed. I just don’t think they should date her. They have plenty of other girls to choose from.”

“They were all talking about her last night. She looked fucking hot in that dress. I guarantee one of the guys on the team will ask her out after break if they haven’t already.”

“They haven’t. She told me no one asked her out.”

“That doesn’t make sense, unless... wait, you didn’t tell the guys she was off limits, did you?”

“Let’s talk later. It’s starting to snow and the roads are slick. I need to pay attention.”

“Did you or not?”

I sigh. “I didn’t actually say those words. Eli and Zane are the ones who said it. They think I have feelings for Darcy so they didn’t ask her out, and they told the other guys to back off.”

“Why didn’t you tell them they were wrong?”

“I was trying to protect Darcy. She wants a boyfriend and you know how it is with the guys on the team. They just want a girl for a night or two.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. Darcy can look out for herself. If she finds out you told the guys to stay away from her, whatever friendship you and her have will be over.”

“What the hell was I supposed to do? I don’t want her going out with Eli or Zane or any other guy on the team.”

“Why? Because you want her for yourself?”

“Maybe.” I rub my jaw. “Fuck, I don’t know. This whole roommate thing

was a bad idea. I wish I'd never agreed to it. If I hadn't, maybe Darcy and I would be more than just friends."

"You never would've even got to that point if she wasn't living with you. She'd still see you like a brother."

"So what am I going to do?"

"You need to go back to being roommates, which means no more sex and no more telling other guys they can't date her." He sighs. "I had a feeling this might happen."

"What? That I'd have sex with Darcy?"

"That you'd start having feelings for her and get all possessive. You can't be doing that shit. She's not your girlfriend."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that when I saw her flirting with Eli, something came over me and I wanted to punch him."

"You gotta stop that right now. You can't be feeling that way about a girl you're not dating."

"I didn't plan for this to happen. It's been almost two years since I've felt this way about a girl."

"So why is it different with Darcy? Is it because you're living with her?"

"That, and because I really like her. I like talking to her, hanging out with her. Even when we argue, I still like her. In fact, I think it's funny when she's angry at me, which just makes her even angrier."

"Wes, we're leaving," Avery yells in the background.

"I have to go," Wes says. "Avery's mom is taking us out for dinner."

"Yeah, okay. Have a good Christmas."

"We can talk before that if you need to."

"I'm good. I've been through this before. I can do it again."

"Yeah, but still, I'm here if you want to talk. They're leaving. I gotta go."

"Yeah. Bye."

The snow falls harder as I get closer to my house. When I'm finally there, I smile when I see the lights strung on all the trees in the yard and along the roofline of the house. Darcy would love it. I park the car and get out my phone to take a photo. I'll take some more inside and then send them to Darcy. It's too bad her family doesn't decorate for Christmas. Now I get why she was so excited to decorate for the party.

"You're home!" Ella greets me at the door, giving me a big hug.

"You been waiting at the door for me?" I ask as I go inside.

"No." She laughs. "I was waiting for Ace. He was supposed to pick me

up 10 minutes ago.”

“Who the fuck is Ace?” I ask, going into big brother mode.

“A guy I’m kind of dating,” she says with a shrug.

“What’s kind of dating mean?”

“Theo,” my dad says, coming down the stairs, a big grin on his face. “I was starting to worry.” He gives me a quick hug. “I thought you’d be home hours ago.”

“I needed to do some stuff before I left.”

“He’s here,” Ella says, looking out the window. She grabs her coat from the bench by the door.

“Home by ten,” Dad says to her. “No later.”

“Yeah, got it.” She races outside.

“Do you know this guy?” I ask my dad.

He nods. “He goes to her school. We had him over for dinner last week.”

“And you think he’s good enough for her?”

He laughs a little. “I’m her father. No boy will ever be good enough for her.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Out of all the boys she’s dated, he’s not my favorite, but I don’t see them lasting much longer. There’s a new boy at school she seems to like better. As soon as he shows interest in her, I think Ace will be history.” He goes to the closet and takes out a hanger. “Take your coat off and stay awhile.”

I go over to him and hand him my coat. “So um, where’s Mom?”

“She’s upstairs resting.”

“By resting do you mean…” I don’t even want to say it.

He sighs. “Theo, you know she’s like this every year. Let’s just ignore it and try to have a good holiday.”

“Is she worse than usual?” I ask, keeping my voice down.

“She’s had a difficult few months. I’ve tried to get her back into rehab, but she insists she doesn’t need it.” He closes the closet door and pats me on the back. “Let’s go get you something to eat. I assume you haven’t had dinner?”

“No, but I’m not really hungry.” I glance upstairs, wondering if my mom even remembered I was coming home tonight.

“When are you ever not hungry?” my dad jokes as we walk to the kitchen.

“Hold on.” I stop in the living room and take a picture of the Christmas

tree. It's at least 10 feet tall and covered with lights and ornaments.

"Is that for one of those social media sites?" my dad asks.

"No, it's for Darcy. My roommate."

We continue to the kitchen.

"How's that working out?" my dad asks. "You and this girl? Are you getting along?"

"For the most part, yeah."

"I had a friend in college who roomed with a girl and ended up marrying her." He laughs. "But when they first moved in together, they couldn't stand each other. They bickered constantly."

It sounds like Darcy and me, except for the marrying part.

"How about a leftover steak?" He takes one from the fridge. "I made them last night."

"Yeah, I'll have one. I'll just eat it cold," I say as he puts it on a plate.

"How about some potatoes?" he asks, bringing me the plate. "Or we have some leftover salad."

"The steak is enough." I take the plate to the kitchen table and sit down.

My dad fills a glass with water and sets it in front of me as he joins me at the table. "You must be looking forward to getting a few weeks off from training."

"I like the training. It's the coach I don't like. But it sounds like we're getting a new one soon. They interviewed a guy last week. He's already met the team. He's a lot younger than Coach and actually listens to us instead of yelling at us."

"He's replacing Coach Daley?"

"Not yet, but he will. He'll be the assistant coach until Daley retires, but that's gotta be soon. The guy's ancient."

"And you like the new guy?"

"He's great. I first met him when Darcy and I were at the mall. He was waiting in line with us to get coffee and we started talking. He's awesome. He even paid for our drinks."

My dad smiles a little. "Sounds like you and Darcy spend a lot of time together."

"I asked her to help me shop for Mom and Ella. It's not what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"That I'm dating Darcy, but I'm not. And I wouldn't. We agreed it'd be a

bad idea.”

“So you two have talked about this? About dating?”

“Not exactly. We’ve just made comments about it being a bad idea. Roommates dating.”

He’s smiling like he thinks there’s something going on with Darcy and me. I don’t know why he’d think that. I haven’t given him a reason to. I made it clear Darcy and I are just roommates. And last night doesn’t change that. Like I told Wes, it was just sex. The fact that I haven’t stopped thinking about Darcy since she left doesn’t mean I like her as anything more than a roommate.

My phone rings and I see Darcy’s name on the screen.

“Hey,” I answer.

“Did you make it home?”

“Yeah, sorry I forgot to let you know.”

“And? Is everything okay? With your mom?”

“Yeah,” I say, not wanting to tell her with my dad listening in. “Oh, and the house looks like something out of a Christmas movie. I took some pictures. I’ll send them to you.”

“I’m so jealous. You better not tell me you have Christmas cookies.”

“We do.” I glance at the counter where there’s five containers of cookies stacked up. “We have all different kinds. I was just about to have one.”

“I hate you.”

I smile. “If there’s any left, I’ll bring you some.”

“They’ll be three weeks old by then.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll just send you pictures.”

“Okay, well, I just wanted to make sure you got home. Merry Christmas!”

“You too.” I end the call and notice my dad staring at me. “What?”

“Who was that?”

“Darcy. She wanted to make sure I got home.”

“Sounds like she cares about you.”

“It’s not like that,” I say, getting up to grab a cookie from one of the containers. “I told you, we’re just friends.”

“Uh, huh,” he says, in a tone that implies we’re more than that.

I give up. He can believe what he wants. It doesn’t change anything. Darcy and I are roommates and will never be anything more than that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEO

“SO ANYWAY,” I say, “going back to what I was saying about Coach Daley, I’m looking forward to getting rid of him and having someone else in charge of the team. I really like this new guy. I hope he’s as good as he seems.”

“Theo.” My mom walks in, her eye makeup smudged and her hair a mess. She’s wearing a white bathrobe and nothing on her feet. “You’re home.” She comes over to me as I stand up.

“Hey, Mom.” I hug her. “You want to join us?”

“Have a seat,” my dad says, getting up to pull a chair out for her. “Theo was just telling me about his new football coach.”

She smiles at me across the table, a drunk smile, and her eyelids are half closed. “You have a new coach? That’s exciting.”

“It’s not official yet, but I’m sure it will be by the time I’m back.”

“And you like this man?”

“Yeah, he’s great. I was telling Dad how much better Kurt is than Coach Daley.”

“Kurt?” my mom asks, her brows lifting.

“That’s the new coach. He used to work at a college in New Jersey and really turned the team around. They went from losing almost every game to having a winning season.”

“That’s impressive,” my dad says.

My mom gets up from the table, wobbling a little.

“Honey, you okay?” my dad asks. “Can I get you something?”

She gives him a weak smile. “I’m going back to bed. I can’t seem to stay awake.”

I glance at my dad as my mom comes over to me. “Goodnight, honey.”

She rubs my shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm not more awake. I will be tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Mom."

She leaves and I look at my dad. "She looks like shit."

He sighs. "There's nothing I can do. Believe me, I've tried."

"Get the liquor out of the house."

"I've done that, but she buys more. I have to work during the day. I can't watch her every second."

"Then have someone else do it. Hire someone to come over here and keep an eye on her."

"Theo, you know she wouldn't stand for that. She doesn't even want her friends stopping by unannounced. Donna came by yesterday morning to drop off a present and your mother wouldn't even answer the door."

"If she's that drunk first thing in the morning, you gotta do something."

"I've tried. I'm out of ideas. I can't force her into rehab again. She has to want to do this herself."

"You have to do something. She's getting worse."

He rubs his jaw. "It was that damn reunion. I wish she hadn't gone. It brought back old memories that I thought she'd moved past, but clearly she hasn't."

"Memories about her ex?" I ask, not wanting to call him my dad.

"Yes," he says with a sigh. "Sherry said people at the reunion were asking about him. Obviously not people she'd stayed in touch with, but people she hadn't seen since high school. They assumed your mother was still with him."

"I don't get it. He didn't even go to that high school. Why would they ask about him?"

"He'd taken her to several of the school's dances. And he played football at his high school and was apparently pretty good. Good enough that people knew who he was."

"He played football? Mom never told me that."

"There's a lot she hasn't told you. She thought the less you knew about him, the better."

"Why?"

"She didn't want you feeling any kind of attachment to him. And she didn't want you making decisions for your own life based on what you knew about your father."

"Like what?"

My dad shrugs. “Maybe you wouldn’t have played football if you knew your father had, just to prove you were nothing like him.”

I pause a moment to think about that. “I guess that’s possible, but I’ve always loved football. I think I would’ve played no matter what. What else do you know about him?”

“Not much, and I’d rather have your mother tell you these things, not me. It’s not my place.”

“Mom’s not going to tell me anything. And I can’t ask. Every time she thinks about that asshole, she drinks more. I keep worrying he’ll show up here someday and make things even worse.”

My dad looks away, then quickly gets up, taking my empty plate to the sink.

“What’s the rush?” I joke, wondering why he got up in the middle of our conversation.

“I just wanted to clean up,” he says, putting the plate in the dishwasher. “How about some dessert? Your mom and Ella made cookies the other day.” He brings over a plastic container and sets it in front of me.

“What’s going on?” I stand up and turn to him, knowing he’s hiding something. He wouldn’t just get up from the table like that unless he was trying to avoid telling me something.

“Go ahead and try one.” He takes the lid off the container. “Look what a lovely job your sister did decorating them.” He holds up a Christmas cookie shaped like a candy cane with red and white stripes of frosting.

“Dad, tell me what’s going on. Did that bastard show up here?”

“No.” He sets the cookie down. “At least, not that I know of.”

“Then what? What are you not telling me?”

He glances behind him to make sure we’re alone, then says, “I believe he called her. I can’t say for sure, but I overheard your mother talking to someone and it sounded like—”

“When?” I ask, anger rising inside me.

“About a month ago. But like I said, I can’t say for sure it was him. I’m just guessing from what I overheard.”

“Which was what?”

“Theo, I don’t think we should talk about this. The point I was trying to make is that your mother started drinking a lot more after that call. I’m hoping after some time passes that—”

“Tell me what you heard,” I say, my jaw tightening. “What the fuck did

that bastard say to her?”

“All I overheard was her telling the person on the phone that it was too late and that you were a grown man now and how she didn’t want him coming into your life and interfering.”

“So this was about *me*? That’s why he called?”

“I’m assuming so. From the way she was talking, it sounded as though he wanted to know more about you and wanted to see you.”

“Fuck that.” I fold my arms over my chest. “After all this time, after leaving Mom and me with nothing, he thinks he can just show up and be part of my life?” I walk past my dad, shaking my head. “How could he do that to Mom? After what he’s put her through? How could he just call her like that?” I turn back to my dad. “Has he done this before? Has he called her?”

“Not that I know of.” My dad walks over to me. “Don’t ask her about this. It’ll only upset her and make her drink more.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mutter.

“I didn’t want to upset you by telling you this. I only did so because I’m worried he might try to find you.”

“How? He doesn’t even know my name, does he?”

“If he knows your mother’s last name, which he obviously does if he was able to find her phone number, then he’d know yours as well.”

“Yeah, but Jenkins is a common name. And he doesn’t know where I live, where I go to college. It’d be nearly impossible for him to find me.”

“Actually, it wouldn’t. You have pictures on social media of you and your mother on the Halston campus. Photos of you in your football uniform. You probably even have some of the house you’re living in. If he saw those, it’d be very easy to find you. Perhaps just to be safe, you should take those photos down.”

“Why? I’m not afraid of him. If he wants to come see me, let him. I’ll be waiting at the door, ready to punch his face in. Do you know what he looks like?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’ve never seen photos of him. I don’t even know his name. Your mother refuses to tell me. She doesn’t want me telling you and having you go look for him.”

“I’m not going to look for him. Why the hell would I try to find him?”

“You may not want to now, but you might in the future.”

“Trust me, I won’t. That asshole is the reason Mom started drinking and hasn’t stopped.”

“It wasn’t just him. Losing her parents right after you were born also contributed to her drinking. She had no support system. No money. That’s a lot to deal with for someone who’s only 18. It’s a lot for someone of any age.”

“Yeah, which is why that bastard never should’ve taken off and left her. She needed him and he didn’t fucking care.”

My dad puts his hand on my shoulder and smiles. “Let’s go in the living room and watch some TV. It’s the holidays. We don’t need to be getting ourselves down about things from the past. Let’s just try to relax and enjoy our time together.”

He always does this. He tries to pretend bad things aren’t happening by putting on a smile and acting like everything’s fine. It’s one of the few things I don’t like about him, probably because it’s something I do myself. I laugh off my problems and pretend shit doesn’t bother me. I don’t know why I do it, but I don’t like that I do, so when I see my dad doing it, it bothers me. It’s like looking in a mirror, seeing something in myself reflected back at me that I can’t seem to change.

We watch a movie until Ella shows up at 10:30, way past her 10 o’clock curfew. My dad goes easy on her since it’s the holidays, but I’m angry the guy she was out with didn’t get her home on time. What the hell were they doing out that late? Knowing what I did at that age makes me not want to know the answer. I hope she didn’t have sex with that guy. I don’t even want to think about that. To me, she’s still my baby sister who’s never even kissed a boy.

THE NEXT DAY, I go down to the kitchen for breakfast and find my mom making pancakes and bacon. She’s dressed in jeans and a red sweater and has on a red and white holiday apron. Christmas music is playing from the speakers in the ceiling, Ella’s decorating the pancakes with whipped cream and holiday sprinkles, and my dad’s at the table sipping his coffee and reading a newspaper. If a stranger walked in, they’d think we’re the perfect little family. And we would be if my mom didn’t drink to the point of passing out every damn day. If the guy who knocked her up all those years ago really did call her a few weeks ago and make things even worse, I’m going to hunt

that bastard down and destroy him.

“Feeling better?” I say, going up to my mom.

“Theo, you’re up.” She turns and gives me a hug. “I was just about to send Ella to your room to tell you breakfast is ready.”

“I’m surprised she’s up this early,” I say, looking at my sister. “Given that she got home so late.”

“Don’t start,” Ella says, narrowing her eyes at me. “Or you’re not getting your Christmas gift.”

“What time did you get home?” Mom asks Ella.

“She was only a few minutes late,” Dad says from behind his newspaper. “And I’ve already spoken to her about it.”

“You need to speak with that guy she was with,” I say. “He was the one driving. He should’ve got her home on time.”

“The roads were bad,” Ella says, taking her plate of pancakes to the table. “We had to go slow.”

“Then leave earlier so you get here on time.” I pick up the pitcher of orange juice and pour myself a glass. “Where’d you guys go last night?”

“Dad,” Ella says with an annoyed sigh. “Make him stop.”

“Theo, leave your sister alone. Your mother and I can handle this.”

“Apparently not, because she was a half hour late last night.”

My mom hands me a plate of pancakes. “I remember quite a few times when you came into the house past curfew.”

“Yeah, but I’m a guy,” I say, joining Ella and my dad at the table. “It’s different for girls.”

“It’s not different,” Ella insists. “And at least I didn’t stay out all night like you used to do.”

“Okay, you two, that’s enough,” my dad says, folding his paper up. “Let’s talk about something else.” He picks up his cup of coffee as my mom sits next to him.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I ask my mom.

“I had some toast earlier,” she says. “My stomach isn’t feeling well this morning.”

Yeah, because she’s hung over. I wonder if she’s already started drinking this morning. She looks a lot better than last night, but she also has all her makeup on, which makes her look more alert and awake.

“So what are we doing today?” I ask, stuffing pancakes in my mouth. My mom’s a good cook, even when she’s been drinking. I miss her cooking when

I'm at school.

"Someone still has to do his holiday shopping," my mom says, glancing at my dad.

"It's tradition," he says, smiling at her. "I always wait until the last minute." He looks over at me. "Would you like to join me?"

"To go shopping the day before Christmas?" I laugh. "Yeah, I'll pass."

"I'm going to Addie's house to wrap presents," Ella says, putting more whipped cream on her pancakes. "It's a charity thing we're doing for school. The presents are for kids who have to spend Christmas in the hospital."

"She'll only be gone for the morning," my mom says to me.

"So what do you want to do?" I ask my mom, knowing she'll spend the morning drinking if I don't make plans with her.

"I thought you'd want to watch TV and relax. I'm sure you're tired from studying and finals."

"I feel great," I say, smiling at her. "We should do something."

She clears her throat. "I'd love to, honey, but I was just going to go in my room and rest this morning."

"C'mon, Sherry," Dad says, putting his arm around her. "We don't get Theo home much anymore. Spend some time with him."

She nods, a strained smile on her face. "Yes, of course. You're right. I can rest later."

After breakfast, Ella and my dad leave while I stay behind and help my mom clean up. She asks about school and I tell her about my classes. I'm not sure she's listening, but at least she's not drinking.

We go in the living room and I turn on the TV and find a Christmas movie to watch. My mom keeps crossing and uncrossing her legs and folding and unfolding her arms. Not having a drink is making her anxious. She can't sit still. It's not even 10 in the morning and she's already craving a drink. She's definitely getting worse. She used to be able to hide her addiction. Now she can't.

"How's your new roommate?" she asks. "Is it Darla? Darlene?"

"Darcy. And she's fine."

My mom laughs a little. "I can't imagine you living with a girl. The poor thing must be tripping all the time, the way you're always tossing things on the floor."

"I'm getting better. She's got me picking stuff up."

My mom smiles. "You must really like her if she's able to get you to

clean up. Even I couldn't do that."

I shrug. "She's paying rent. I didn't think it was fair to make her pay for a place that's a mess."

My mom shifts toward me on the couch, crossing her legs. "Has anything happened between you two?"

"No," I say with a laugh. "Why does everyone assume something's happened? Dad said the same thing."

She uncrosses her legs. "You're a boy. She's a girl. It's only natural something might happen."

"Well, it didn't. We're just roommates, and she's not planning to stay. She's already looking for a summer rental."

My mom's phone rings, startling her. She checks it to see who's calling. "I'll be just a minute," she says, racing out of the room. "Hi, Dana. I meant to call you but..." Her voice becomes fainter as she heads down the hall.

I get up and follow her. I shouldn't listen in, but the way she raced out of here to talk to her friend has me wondering what's going on. She's in the kitchen so I wait just outside of it as she talks.

"No, he hasn't, and I don't think he will. I made it clear I wouldn't tell him anything about Theo. Why would I? If he wanted to know his son, he should've been here the past 21 years," she says, her voice getting louder. "Who does he think he is, calling me out of the blue like that, expecting me to tell him about Theo?" She pauses. "Yes, I know he doesn't, but that's his own fault. He could've been here and he wasn't. He took off and left us." She stops to listen. "No. He'd tell me if he had. I honestly don't know why he'd even try. I told him Theo wants nothing to do with him." She pauses again. "Yes, I will. Have a good Christmas. Tell John and the kids I say hi. Bye, Dana."

I wait a moment, then go into the kitchen. My mom's standing in front of the sink, her back to me, downing a shot with one hand and holding a bottle of whiskey in the other.

I come up behind her. "Mom."

She whips around. "Theo! What are you doing in here?"

"I came to get a snack." I glance at the whiskey bottle. "Isn't it a little early for that?"

She clears her throat. "I needed something to take the edge off. As much as I love the holidays, there's just so much to do and I—"

"Mom, stop." I take the bottle from her. "This isn't about the holidays."

You drink like this all the time.”

“And it’s my right to do so.” She yanks the bottle back and sets it down, then walks over to the fridge and opens it. “What would you like for a snack? I have some wonderful cheeses I bought at the wine store yesterday.”

“Forget the snack.” I walk over to her and shut the fridge. “I need to ask you something.”

“If it’s about my drinking, I’m not going to discuss that with you. I get enough—”

“It’s not about that.”

“Then what is it?”

I hesitate, knowing if I ask her this she’ll drink more. But she’s going to drink no matter what and I need to know what’s going on.

“Have you heard from him? My...” I pause. “Dad?”

“No. He’s out shopping.”

“Not that dad. I’m talking about the guy who got you pregnant in high school.”

She looks at me, her face getting pale. “Why would you ask me that?”

I shrug. “I just wondered. So have you?”

“No,” she says with a harsh laugh. “Why would he call me after all these years?”

“Mom, tell me the truth.”

She hurries back to the sink where she left the whiskey. She pours a shot and drinks it. “Go back to the living room, Theo. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Mom, I know he called.” I go over to her. “I overheard you talking just now. I heard you saying he was trying to find me.”

She takes a swig of whiskey straight from the bottle, squeezing her eyes shut as she swallows it. “Why are you doing this? Why are you asking me about him?”

“Because I need to know. If he’s trying to find me—”

“He’s not.” She whips toward me, pointing her finger at me, her eyes wide. “You are MY son, not his. He has no claim to you and never will. And I made that clear when he called last—” She stops, realizing she just admitted he called.

“When was it?” I ask. “When did he call?”

She looks away. “The night before Thanksgiving.”

So that’s why she was drinking more than usual. He called and upset her and she dealt with it by getting so drunk she passed out before dinner, ruining

our Thanksgiving. I'd kill that asshole if I could find him.

"What did he want?" I ask.

"To see you." She looks back at me. "I told him if he showed up at the house, Steven would call the police."

"He knows where we live?"

"I assume he does. It isn't that hard to find out with everything on the internet."

I didn't even think about that. What if he showed up here? I don't want to see that bastard and I don't want my mom seeing him again. She'd drink even more.

"Has he called you before?"

"No." She takes another swig of whiskey. "That was the only time."

I take the bottle from her. "Don't do this. Don't drink because of him. He's not worth it."

"Stay out of it." She grabs the bottle from me. "You're my son, not my parent. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"I'm concerned about you."

"Then stop." She steps closer to me, the bottle held in her hand. "Stop being concerned about something you have no control over. Worry about your own life. And let me worry about mine." She goes around me and storms out of the room.

When I go back to the living room, she's not there. She's probably in her room, finishing off that bottle of whiskey.

It's because of him. The asshole who ruined her life. Why did he have to call her? Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

He told her he wanted to see me, but he can't be that stupid. He has to know I hate him and want nothing to do with him.

So much for having a nice Christmas. My dad ruined it. Like he ruined Thanksgiving. And ruined my mom's life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DARCY

MY PHONE RINGS as I'm unpacking my suitcase. It's Avery calling.

"Hey," I answer, putting her on speaker so I can put stuff away while we talk.

"Hey, I got your message. Are you really leaving already?"

"I already left. I'm back at the house. I'm unpacking my stuff, then I'm going to take a long hot shower and go to bed."

"You're spending the rest of winter break there? You're not going back to your parents' house?"

"I don't want to be around them right now. I can't believe they told me on Christmas day. It was bad enough we didn't have a tree or lights or gifts to open, but then on top of that, they tell me they're getting a divorce?"

"Yeah, that's pretty bad."

"And what's even worse is they couldn't understand why I was upset. They said I was an adult now and should understand that divorce is just a relationship ending after it's run its course. Like I should just be okay with it, and be okay with them selling the house I grew up in."

"Did they at least try to understand why you were upset?"

"No. When I started crying, they sent me to my room, like I was a little kid. Then later, my mom tried to convince me that this was a good thing. That we were all getting a new start with me at college and my parents each getting their own place. She didn't show any emotion. Neither did my dad. I swear those two don't even have emotions. I'm starting to wonder if I'm even their kid."

"You are," Avery says. "You look just like your mom."

"I couldn't be in that house for the rest of break. Watching my mom and

dad treat each other like strangers. Seeing the blank walls and all our stuff packed in boxes. Oh, and let's not forget my mom's new boyfriend stopping by all the time."

"Yeah, that'd be hard. I wouldn't want to be around that either. She could've waited to tell you about him."

"I know, right? I needed time to accept the divorce before she introduced me to her new boyfriend."

"Do you think he's the reason your parents are divorcing?"

"They told me that wasn't the reason, but they could've been lying. But my dad didn't seem upset about my mom having a boyfriend so maybe that wasn't the reason. Maybe they just didn't love each other, which makes me really sad because I always thought they did. It makes me wonder if love really exists or if it's just some temporary feeling that isn't actually real."

"Darcy, don't do that. Don't make up stories like that because of what's happening with your parents. Love definitely exists and it *can* last forever. It doesn't have to end. You should know that from all those romance books you read."

"I'm not reading them anymore. In fact, I'm going to pack them all up in a box and donate them. I can't read about people falling in love. It seems fake now. I don't even want to watch romantic movies."

"You will. You're just upset right now because of your parents. Maybe it was good you left. You don't want your parents' situation affecting how you see relationships."

"It's too late. On the drive back here, I started to wonder if I ever want to get married." I collapse down on my bed. "I might be better off being in short-term relationships that don't go anywhere. Why commit to someone if it's just going to end?"

"You don't mean that. All you talked about last year is how much you want to fall in love and have this big beautiful wedding and—"

"Yeah, I know, but that was before yesterday," I say, staring up at the ceiling. "When my belief in love was destroyed."

"Darcy, I'm really sorry this happened, and on Christmas, which I know you were really looking forward to."

"They might've ruined Christmas for me. Now every year I'll associate Christmas with them getting divorced. And what's going to happen next Christmas? Will I be spending half the day with my mom and her boyfriend and the other half with my dad, who will probably have a girlfriend by then?"

“Maybe you could come here. My mom loves having people over for Christmas.”

“Speaking of that, I should let you go. You should be with your family. What are you guys doing tonight?”

“Um, not much,” she says, but I can tell she’s hiding something.

“Avery, just tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s talk tomorrow after you’ve had time to rest. Maybe by then you’ll feel a little better about things.”

“I’m not going to feel better. Just tell me what you’re doing. I don’t like when you hide stuff from me.”

Avery sighs. “Okay, fine. We’re going to drive around town looking at lights and drinking hot chocolate. Then we’re coming home and watching holiday movies and eating all the snacks Carly put out. She’s been making stuff all week. Red-and-green colored caramel corn. All these different snack mixes. Sugar cookies. We have so much food. Luckily, Wes eats a lot so it won’t go to waste.”

I almost say I’m jealous, but then Avery would say that’s why she didn’t want to tell me, proving her point that she should’ve kept this from me. Maybe she should’ve. Now I feel worse about being here alone in this big house the day after Christmas when everyone else is spending time with family doing holiday stuff.

“That sounds really fun!” I say, trying to sound excited for her. “Tell your family I say hi! We can talk later this week.”

“Darcy, are you okay? I’m worried about you.”

“I’m not okay, but I will be. I just need some time to let all this sink in.”

“Call me if you need to talk. And if you need to get out of there, you’re always welcome here. I know it’s a long drive, but it’d be worth it to not be alone there.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll talk to you later. Bye, Avery.” I end the call, then break down crying. I cried on the drive back here too. My mom would say I’m being childish, but she doesn’t get what a huge change this is for me. I’ll no longer be able to go home to my house or my room or the neighborhood I grew up in. Holidays will never be the same. I’ll never again see my parents together as a couple. I’ll have to see them with other people—people I may not even like. I wish my parents understood that instead of acting like I need to get over it and move on.

After a long hot shower, I put on some pajama pants and a t-shirt and go

downstairs to find something to eat. The fridge is empty except for a few cans of beer. I tossed out the food before I left on Friday, assuming Theo and I would be gone for three weeks. Opening a cupboard, I find a box of crackers. I take it to the couch and sit down, then notice a sock sticking out between the couch cushions.

“Theo,” I mutter, yanking the sock out and tossing it on the chair beside me. He’s still leaving his clothes everywhere, but he’s better than he used to be. At least his underwear isn’t under the coffee table. I check just to make sure. There’s no underwear, but there’s a sock, the one that matches the one I just threw on the chair.

Sitting back on the couch, I smile as I think about Theo and how he managed to get one sock under the couch cushion and another under the table. He was probably sleeping on the couch and got hot and yanked his socks off while he was still asleep. I’ve seen him undress like that while he’s sleeping. It’s kind of impressive that he does it without waking up.

I miss Theo. I shouldn’t, but I do. He’s a really good listener and I could use that right now. I’m sure he wouldn’t want to hear me go on and on about my parents getting divorced, but he’d listen anyway, like any good friend would. I hope we can still be friends after what we did. We agreed nothing would change, but I feel like it already has. I wanted to call him last night after my parents told me their news, but I didn’t think I should. Calling him on Christmas seems like something a girlfriend would do, not someone you’ve only been friends with for a few weeks.

Turning on the TV, I search for something to watch but there’s nothing that interests me. I look over at the Christmas tree I put up for the party and the lights I strung up around the room. Seeing them now just makes me angry that I didn’t get to have Christmas this year so I get up and yank down the lights. I pick up the artificial tree, which is a cheap five-foot tree that doesn’t weigh much, and drag it over to the stairs that go to the basement. I consider leaving it there until tomorrow because of my fear of going to the basement at night, but then just decide to take it down there so I don’t have to look at it in the morning. I hurry down the stairs, drop the tree off at the bottom, then race back upstairs.

Looking around the room, it looks bare without the tree, but it’s still better than my parents’ house. It feels like home here. My parents’ house no longer does. Sadness creeps over me as I think about that. It’s still early, but I don’t want to stay awake, knowing if I do, I’ll just think about my parents’

divorce. I go up to my room and fall asleep.

IN THE MORNING, I'm drying off from the shower when I hear something downstairs. I ignore it, deciding it's probably just the wind or the furnace making noise. As I walk over to my dresser, I hear it again. It's not the wind, and it doesn't sound like the furnace. It almost sounds like footsteps.

What if it's a burglar? The locks on this house are old and flimsy. It'd be easy to break in. And everyone knows that the college kids who live on this street are home for winter break. This is the perfect time for someone to break in.

Looking around for a weapon, I find a long skinny flashlight in my nightstand. It's not much, but I could hit someone over the head with it and maybe knock them out. Taking my phone and my flashlight, I go over to my door and crack it open. I don't hear the footsteps anymore, just silence. Maybe whoever was here left.

Leaving my room, I slowly tiptoe down the hall, my phone in one hand and the flashlight in the other. I'm only wearing a towel. I probably should've put clothes on before going down to face a possible burglar, but it's too late for that now. I'm almost at the top of the stairs when I hear someone behind me.

"What are you doing?"

The deep voice startles me and I drop my phone. I whip around, the flashlight held above my head, ready to strike the intruder.

"Theo?" I say, noticing him standing just outside his room. "What are you doing here?"

"I decided to come back early." He smiles a little as he walks up to me. "I wasn't expecting this kind of welcome, but hey, I'm not complaining."

"What are you—" I stop when I see him staring at my body. I look down and see my towel is on the floor. "Shit!" I reach down and grab it. "Turn around!" I yell, hurrying to cover myself.

"You want me to hold that?" he asks, reaching for the flashlight.

I hand it to him. "I told you to turn around," I say, quickly securing the towel around me.

"Why? It's not like I haven't seen you naked before." He smiles a little.

“I’ve done a lot more than that.”

I grab the flashlight from him and go past him. “I’ll be in my room.”

“Darcy, wait.” He follows me to my room, remaining at the door as I put the flashlight back in my nightstand. “Why are you back so early?”

“Because I didn’t want to be around my parents.”

“Why? Did you guys get in a fight?”

I pause, not wanting to say it, still not believing it’s really happening. “My parents are getting divorced.”

“Holy shit.” Theo races over to me, wrapping me in his arms. “Darcy, I’m so sorry. When did you find out?”

“Yesterday.” I rest my head on Theo’s chest, liking the feel of his arms around me, and the solid feel of his chest. I feel safe. Warm. Comforted. All things I should’ve felt when I was home, but didn’t.

“They told you on Christmas? Who the fuck does that?”

“Exactly what I thought, but my parents didn’t get it. They couldn’t figure out why I was so upset.”

“Nothing against your parents, but that’s a really shitty thing to do,” he says, keeping me in his arms. I’m so glad he’s here. Last night was really hard. Being alone here, thinking about what happened? I couldn’t sleep. But having Theo here, I already feel better. “So what happened with Christmas? Did you guys do anything?”

“No. There wasn’t a tree or decorations or presents. They put money in my account and said that was my gift. My mom made a ham for dinner, but I didn’t eat it. I was too upset.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t want to bother you on Christmas.”

“What the hell?” He pulls back and looks at me. “You wouldn’t be bothering me. Why would you even think that?”

“Because I didn’t think I could. It seemed like something a... girlfriend would do. Not your roommate.”

“We don’t have to be dating for you to call me. And we’re not just roommates. We’re friends. I thought that was clear by now.”

“It is, but we haven’t been friends for that long and I didn’t think it’d be right to call you when you were with your family.”

“You can call me whenever you want,” he says, looking me in the eye. “And if you need me, you better fucking call me.”

I smile a little. “I will. Next time.”

He's being really sweet and understanding. It makes sense now why I missed him so much. I was only away from him for a few days, but I really missed him and didn't understand why. Now I do. There's something about Theo that makes me feel better, even when I'm feeling really down. Maybe it's his big goofy grin or his warm hugs or the way he's so laid back and easygoing about stuff. Whatever it is, I missed him.

He sits down on the bed and pulls me down beside him. "So what do you want to do today?"

"I was going to clean my room and maybe do some laundry."

"Wrong answer. Try again."

"What do you mean?"

"You shouldn't be doing chores today. You should do something fun. Something that gets your mind off what happened."

"Like what?"

"We could watch movies. Go to the store and load up on junk food. Get really drunk. Any of those things sound appealing?"

"They kind of all do."

He stands up. "Get dressed and meet me downstairs. We'll start by going to the store."

"Right now?"

"We have to. We have no food." He pauses. "Shit, I should've brought some food back. We had all kinds of Christmas cookies and these peppermint brownies that Ella made and like three different types of snack mix. If I knew you were here, I would've brought you some."

I get up. "Why aren't you still there? Why'd you come back?"

"I didn't want to be there anymore."

"Why? What happened?"

"I'll tell you later," he says, walking to the door. "I'll see you downstairs."

After I'm dressed, I go down to the living room and see Theo playing a video game. It used to annoy me when he did that. It made me think he's immature, but then I realized it's just the way he relieves stress, like I do with shopping. And those games he plays actually take a lot of skill. He's tried to teach me several times and I get frustrated and quit.

"That was fast," he says, putting the game controller down.

"I just threw something on. I didn't feel like doing my makeup. It's not like I'll see anyone I know. Everyone's home on break."

“I think you look good without it.” He turns off the game and gets up from the couch.

That’s another thing I like about Theo. He doesn’t care how I look. He’s seen me at my worst—first thing in the morning when my hair’s a mess or hungover from a night of partying—and I don’t even care because he’s just a friend. It’s great to be able to be myself around a guy and not worry about how I look.

As we’re driving to the store, I turn to Theo. “So what happened? Why are you here?”

“My mom’s drinking was out of control. I’ve never seen her that bad. I didn’t want to be around her so I left.”

“Why was she drinking so much? Was it because of the holidays?”

“I don’t know.” He pauses, then says, “That’s a lie. I know why. I just don’t like saying it. Or thinking it.”

He pulls into the grocery store and parks. His head is down and he doesn’t have that big smile on his face that’s always there. It breaks my heart to see him sad. He’s almost always happy. I’ve never seen him like this.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DARCY

“THEO, TALK TO ME.” I take off my seatbelt and turn to him. “Tell me what happened.”

“The reason she was drinking so much,” he says, staring straight ahead. “It’s me. I’m the reason. Being around me reminded her of him.”

“Who?”

“The bastard who got her pregnant, resulting in me. She’d deny that’s why she was drinking so much, but every damn time she saw me, she’d run off to get another drink. It’s like just seeing me set her off. So I left.”

“Theo, you’re not the reason she did that. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Just being his son is wrong. I’m a constant reminder of him and what he did to her when he left.” Theo looks at me. “He destroyed her by taking off like that without giving her an explanation or telling her where he’d be. He never even called to check in. He just took off and left her alone with a kid.”

“She didn’t have her parents?”

“They died in a car crash right after I was born. And his parents wouldn’t talk to her. They blamed her for why he left.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yeah, she had no one until she met my stepdad. She’s tried to get over that time of her life, but hasn’t. Because of him. I honestly don’t get it. I mean, yeah, I get that what he did was wrong and messed her up, but her life is so much better now. I don’t know why she can’t see that and move on.”

“Maybe she really loved the guy. Maybe that’s why she’s never moved on.”

“I don’t know how she could love a guy that would do something like that.” Theo shakes his head. “This isn’t fair to Ella. I feel so bad for her, but I

don't know what to do about it."

"What isn't fair?"

"Mom not being there for her. It's the holidays and my mom's spent the past couple days in her room, drinking or passed out. She kept telling us she didn't feel well, but we all knew it was a lie. Dad and I tried to take Mom's place and make Christmas dinner and set the table the way she would, but then she came down to eat, drunk and looking like shit, and ruined it. I talked to Ella later and she said she was fine, but I know she wasn't. I can tell when she's lying. We all lie and I'm sick of it."

"What do you mean, you lie?"

"We lie to protect my mom, to cover up her problem. We act like everything's fine when it's not. We've been doing it for years and I'm tired of it. My dad's given up trying to help her. He doesn't know what to do anymore so he quit trying. He didn't want me to leave, but I didn't want to stay there and make things worse."

"You weren't making things worse. You can't blame yourself for your mom's drinking."

"Why wouldn't I? If she'd never had me, she wouldn't still feel so attached to that guy. They probably would've broken up after high school, gone their separate ways, and she never would've started drinking." He looks away, gazing out the front window. "He called her."

"Your dad?"

"Don't call him that. He's not my fucking dad."

"Sorry," I mutter.

Theo glances at me. "I didn't mean to yell at you. I just don't like hearing him called that. Anyway, he called her right before Thanksgiving. That's why she was drinking so much that day. He called to ask her about me. He told her he wanted to see me and she told him it was too late. Now she's worried he'll try to find me."

"What if he did? What would you do?"

"Fucking kill the bastard."

"Theo, I'm serious. What would you do if he showed up at your door one day?"

"I don't know. I'd want to punch him, but I'd also want to know why he left."

"Why? Would it make a difference?"

"Probably not, but I'd still want to know. I can't understand why he'd

leave his kid like that. I know people do it. It's not like he's the only one, but I still don't understand it, especially if he had feelings for my mom." He opens his door. "Let's go. It's getting cold sitting out here."

I feel bad that Theo blames himself for his mom's drinking. I wish I could convince him it wasn't true, but since I can't, maybe I can at least make him feel better or make his smile reappear. I'm not sure how to do that when I'm feeling down myself, but I'm going to try. I care about Theo, more than I probably should as his roommate. But we're also friends and because of that, I want to help him.

"How about this?" I say, holding up a box of cereal with unicorns and rainbows on it.

"Sure. Add it to the cart."

I laugh. "I was kidding." I put the box back. "I don't eat that stuff."

"You eat cereal."

"Not that sugary stuff. My parents didn't allow it." I try to push the cart forward, but Theo holds it back. "C'mon, let's go to the next aisle."

He's staring at me. "Are you telling me you've never had sugary cereal?"

"It wasn't allowed at my house. My parents are doctors. I could only have healthy stuff."

"What if you went to a friend's house?"

"My parents would tell my friend's parents what I could and couldn't eat before I went over there."

Theo pushes the cart to the cereal aisle and starts tossing boxes in it.

"What are you doing?" I ask, catching up to him.

"An intervention. You can't be 20 years old and not experienced the sheer joy of a bowl of colored marshmallows." He tosses another box in the cart, one with a cartoon rabbit on it. "Go grab that unicorn one you were showing me. It's new. I haven't tried it, but it looks good."

"Theo, this is way too much," I say, looking at the 10 boxes of cereal. "How are we going to eat all this?"

"I could finish off two of these before tonight."

"Are you serious? That's so much sugar."

"I'll burn it off. I'm doing a long workout at the gym tomorrow."

"Yeah, but I'm not. If I eat all this, my ass will be huge."

He smiles. "I'd be good with that."

I swat his arm. "Would you stop? We're not supposed to... you know."

"What?" He smiles even more. "What are we not supposed to do?"

“Flirt with each other,” I say, putting my hands on my hips.

“How was I flirting? All I said is I’d be okay if your ass got bigger, although the way it is now is pretty damn perfect.”

“Okay, see?” I point at him. “You did it again.”

“It’s just a compliment. I wasn’t flirting.”

“It was a compliment said in a flirty way, which isn’t appropriate for roommates.”

“Why not? It’s just words. It doesn’t mean anything’s going to happen.” He points to himself. “Go ahead. I’ll prove it to you.”

“Go ahead and what?”

“Compliment me.” He steps back and turns around, like he’s showing me his body.

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes.

“C’mon.” He smiles. “You can’t come up with one thing? I’m not that bad-looking, am I?”

He’s the opposite of bad-looking. He’s extremely hot, and the longer I live with him, the hotter he gets. But I’m not telling him that.

I sigh. “You have nice teeth. They’re very straight.”

“Thanks.” He pushes the cart forward. “See? You gave me a compliment and nothing happened.”

“We’re grocery shopping. What do you think’s going to happen?”

“You might try to grab my ass.” He glances at me as he turns the cart to go down a different aisle. “But since we agreed to only be roommates, I trust that you’ll refrain yourself from inappropriate grabbing of my ass. I’m also not worried you’re going to sneak in my bed tonight and have your way with me.”

I clear my throat, trying to erase the images going through my head of that very scenario he just described. I actually thought about that last night. I imagined myself sneaking into Theo’s bed and us doing what we did the night of the party. It’s the last thing I should’ve been thinking about and I told myself I never would again, and then stupid Theo brings it up in the middle of the grocery store.

“What are you in the mood for?” he asks, pointing to the row of chips.

“Why don’t we just get some of each?”

“Go ahead,” he says. “Get what you want.”

As I’m grabbing bags of chips, I notice a guy approaching us with his cart. It’s Curt, the guy we saw at the mall, the one applying for the job of

assistant football coach.

“Theo,” he says, stopping beside him. “Back from break already?”

“Yeah, I came back early. I didn’t think you’d still be in town. Does this mean you got the job?”

“I’m not supposed to announce it yet, but…” He cracks a smile.

“You got it? Congratulations!” Theo hugs him, a quick shoulder hug, but it takes the guy by surprise. That’s just Theo. He’s a hugger.

“Don’t tell anyone yet,” Curt says. “The school isn’t announcing it until next week.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep quiet.” Theo glances at me. “But I’m not sure about Darcy. She’s not great at keeping secrets.”

“Ignore him,” I say to Curt, coming up beside Theo. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Curt smiles at Theo and me. “I won’t either. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“What secret?” I ask.

“You and Theo. I won’t tell anyone you two are dating, although I don’t know why it’s a secret. You two are together all the time. And the way he looks at you,” Curt says, glancing at Theo, “it’s obvious you’re a couple.”

“No, we’re just friends,” I say, stepping away from Theo. “Friends and roommates. That’s it.”

“Oh. Sorry. I guess I misunderstood. You two seem so natural together and here you are grocery shopping. I just assumed you were dating.” He pushes his cart forward. “I’ll let you two continue your shopping.”

“Yeah, see ya,” Theo says as Curt continues down the aisle.

When he’s gone, I turn to Theo. “That was awkward.”

“What was awkward?”

“That guy thinking we’re dating. It’s the second time he’s said that.”

Theo shrugs. “He must think we make a good couple. And maybe we would if we weren’t roommates.” He points to the cart. “You good? You want any more chips?”

“No, we’ve got enough.”

“Let’s go to the freezer aisle and get some pizzas.”

As we’re walking there, I say to Theo, “Do you really think that?”

“Think what?”

“That we’d be a good couple if we weren’t roommates?”

“Maybe. It’s hard to say without us actually dating.”

“But dating is really just hanging out together, which we already do.”

“Dating is more than hanging out.” He stops at the freezer cooler and grabs five frozen pizzas. “Is this enough?”

“Um, yeah, for like two weeks.”

“More like two days. Have you seen how much I eat?” He continues down the aisle. “What else do you want?”

“Ice cream?”

“Good idea.”

“Maybe not,” I say, looking in the cart. “This is a lot of junk food. Maybe we should get something healthy.”

“Relax. It’s the holidays. Stop worrying about your ass getting fat.” He opens the freezer door. “What do you want?”

“The peppermint one with chocolate swirls.”

He grabs it, then grabs a couple more for himself.

“I think that’s good for now,” I tell him as we leave the aisle.

We go to the register and Theo pays. I offered to pay half, but he wouldn’t let me.

When we’re home, Theo unloads the groceries while I look for a movie to watch.

“What happened to the tree?” he asks from the kitchen.

“I put it in the basement. It was late and you know how I freak out being in the basement at night so I kind of just threw it down there and ran back upstairs. I’m just letting you know so you don’t trip on it when you go down there.”

“Why’d you take it down?”

“Because it reminded me of the Christmas I didn’t get to have. I took the lights down too.”

“That sucks. I liked the lights.”

I turn back and look at him. “Then why’d you get so annoyed when I put them up?”

“I didn’t want the guys giving me shit about it. But I liked how they looked. Why don’t you put them back?”

“It’s too much work.” I turn to the TV and flip through the movies. “What about this one?”

“That’s an action movie. You hate those. It’s all shooting and explosions.”

“That’s better than romance. I’m done watching those.”

Theo comes over to the couch with some bags of chips, tossing them on

the table. “You’re done watching romance movies? Yeah, right.” He hands me a soda.

“I am. They’re all lies. They tell you you’ll find the perfect person, get married, and live happily ever after when the truth is you’ll find a guy you kind of like, marry him because that’s what society expects, then decide you really don’t like him and divorce him.”

Theo sets his soda on the table. “What happened to your parents doesn’t happen to everyone. And I’m sure in the beginning your parents were in love. They just grew apart.”

“Which doesn’t happen in the movies. The couple falls more in love the longer they’re together. Which proves those movies are all lies.” I try to open my soda but can’t. “Can you open this?”

Theo takes the bottle, opens it, and hands it back. “What about all those romance books you read? You’re still going to read them, right?”

“No. I packed them all up in a box. I’m going to take them to a donation place.”

“Why? You love those books. You read them over and over.”

“Yeah, and they’re lies. All lies.” I grab a bag of chips and tug at the top, trying to open it.

“Want some help?” Theo asks.

“No, I got it.” I tug harder and the bag rips open, spilling chips all over me and the couch. “Shit. I made a mess.”

Theo laughs. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll clean it up.” I brush the chips off my lap while Theo picks up the ones on the couch and eats them. I stare at him. “You’re eating couch chips?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“That’s gross. People have sat on this couch. And probably done other things.”

“Probably.” He smiles as he picks up another chip from the couch and eats it.

“Your underwear has been on this couch,” I remind him. “And your dirty socks.”

“I’m not getting your point.” He pops another chip in his mouth.

I give up. Cleanliness is not Theo’s thing. I just need to accept that and try not to think about what’s been on this couch and is now on the chip Theo’s eating.

Going to the kitchen, I get some plastic bowls for the chips and a pair of

scissors to cut them open. I take them to the coffee table and pour the chips I opened into a bowl.

“Nice ass,” Theo says.

I’m right in front of him, bent over, my ass on display. I wasn’t even thinking about that until he said it.

I move over and sit down. “I thought we agreed not to make flirty comments.”

“It was just a comment. I wasn’t flirting. And I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

I turn to him. “Theo, we talked about this. We agreed we can’t be anything more than roommates.”

“And my roommate has a great ass. Why can’t I comment on that?”

I sigh. “You know why.”

“Telling you I like your ass means we’ll have sex? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, but it could lead to that.”

“It doesn’t have to.” He picks up his soda from the table and takes a drink. He’s wearing a t-shirt and every time he moves or picks something up, his arm muscles flex, drawing my eyes to them. I’m a sucker for muscles and Theo is always showing them off. He doesn’t mean to. They’re just there, on display, making me all hot and bothered.

“Here.” I hand him the bowl of chips.

He takes it and pops a chip in his mouth. “The couch chips were better.”

I roll my eyes and start the movie. It’s the action one I picked and I don’t really like it, but I’d rather see things explode than watch a couple kissing and holding hands. It’s not that I don’t believe in love anymore. I just don’t trust that it lasts. I always thought my parents would be married forever. They weren’t very affectionate with each other, but they never fought or even raised their voices. So what happened? Were they never in love, or did they just wake up one day and decide they didn’t like each other anymore?

“You want to go to bed?” Theo asks, noticing me yawning. It’s almost midnight. We’ve been watching movies and eating junk food for hours. We also had a few shots of tequila, but the effect already wore off. I don’t even feel tipsy.

“I’ll help you clean up first,” I say, getting up from the couch.

“Leave it. We can do it tomorrow.”

I nod and head to the stairs.

Theo follows me up to my room, stopping at my door. “If you can’t sleep and want to talk, just wake me up.”

“Okay.” I give him a tired smile. “Thanks. And thanks for cheering me up today.”

“I was going to say the same to you. I was dreading coming back here to an empty house. It really helped having you here.” He gives me a hug. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

He pulls back and our eyes meet. He has that look, like he’s about to kiss me, and part of me wishes he would, but we can’t. We shouldn’t.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, letting me go.

As he walks back to his room, I feel like running after him, running into his arms, into his room and his bed. I’m having all these feelings for him that I shouldn’t be having and definitely shouldn’t be acting on.

I shut the door and get into bed and try not to think about Theo being in a bed just a few feet away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEO

WHEN I LEFT for the gym this morning, Darcy was still in her room. I hope she slept last night and wasn't up thinking about her parents' divorce. I can't believe they told her that on Christmas day. She was so excited to go home for Christmas and then didn't get to celebrate it. I might have to do something about that. I know she said seeing the tree made her sad, but maybe I could change that.

"You just get here?" Curt asks, coming into the gym.

"No, I've been here for hours. I was going to leave in a few minutes." I grab a towel from the bench and wipe the sweat from my face.

"Hours, huh?" Curt walks up to me. "That's a long workout."

I shrug. "I needed to blow off some steam."

"Have a fight with your roommate?" he asks, smiling.

"No. I just had some issues at home." I walk over to the weights I was using and put them back on the rack.

"What kind of issues?" Curt asks.

"I don't want to get into it. I shouldn't have said anything."

Curt comes over to me. "You can talk to me, Theo. I'm going to be your coach soon and problems at home often lead to problems on the field."

"They won't," I say, taking the plates off the barbell. "I keep that shit out of the game. I've learned how to keep the two separate."

"Is that why you're back early? Because of problems at home?"

"Yeah, kind of," I say, putting the weighted plates back on the stand.

"Mom or dad?" he asks.

"What was that?" I ask, wiping my face with a towel.

"Problems at home usually involve the parents. I was wondering if this

issue is with your mom or your dad?” He waits for me to answer. When I don’t, he says, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. I was just trying to help. Go ahead to the locker room.”

I turn to leave, then turn back. “It’s my mom. She drinks too much.”

He looks down, then back up at me. “I’m sorry to hear that. Has it been going on for awhile?”

“Basically, my whole life. It started after she had me. The guy who got her pregnant took off and left her alone with a kid and no money and no place to live. She was never the same after that.”

Curt doesn’t say anything. He probably thought I’d tell him something else, something less serious, like that I was fighting with my parents over money or not getting the car I wanted. I wish it were that simple. We’d be able to get over something like that and move on. We can’t do that with my mom’s drinking. It just gets worse while my dad, Ella, and I stand by watching it, not knowing what to do.

“I’m going to head out,” I say.

“Yes, of course. Go ahead.”

I leave and go to the locker room to shower. I regret telling Curt about my mom. I don’t want him thinking my family issues will affect how I play, because it’s not true. In fact, football is the one thing that distracts me from my problems at home. I zone in on the game and only think about that.

Darcy has that effect on me too. When I’m with her, I forget about my problems unless we’re talking about them. If we’re not, my thoughts don’t even go there. Like yesterday, going to the store with her and watching movies, I didn’t even think about what happened when I was home. Maybe that’s why I like hanging out with her so much. She gives my mind a break.

“Hey, Wes,” I say, answering his call as I drive home. “How was your Christmas?”

“Great! There was no fighting and no one telling me what a fuck-up I am.” He laughs a little. “It was a totally different experience than what I’m used to. How about you?”

“It sucked, so I left. I’m back at school.”

“What happened?”

“The usual shit with my mom. I’ll tell you later. I’m driving back from the gym. I’m almost home. Hey, did Avery say anything to you about me and Darcy?”

“No. I don’t think Darcy told her.”

“Seriously? I thought she would’ve told her right after it happened.”

“Maybe Darcy doesn’t want Avery to know.”

“Then don’t tell her. Keep it between us.”

“You know I can’t do that. Avery and I agreed not to keep secrets from each other.”

“Then wait. See if Darcy tells her this week. Does Avery know she’s here?”

“Yeah, Darcy called Avery and told her about the divorce. I can’t believe her parents told her on Christmas.”

“I know. She was really upset about it. And she didn’t get to have Christmas. I’m thinking of having it here just to cheer her up. Like putting up some lights and the tree and maybe giving her something to open.”

“Sounds like something you’d do for a girlfriend. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“We’re not dating. I’m just being a friend. She’s feeling really down and doing this might make her feel better.” I pull into the driveway and see Darcy leaving the house. “Hey, I gotta go. We’ll talk later.”

“Yeah, bye.”

“Hey,” I say to Darcy, getting out of my car. She looks gorgeous, her silky blond hair in long waves around her face, her makeup done, and wearing a red wool coat with a plaid scarf. “Where are you going?”

“I’m just going to get a coffee and walk around the mall. I need to get out of the house. You want to come with?”

I pause a moment. “Um, no, I have some things to do.”

“Okay.” She smiles as she goes past me to her car.

“Hey, while you’re out, why don’t you get a manicure?” I say, thinking I might need more time for my plan. If she’s only gone for an hour, I won’t be done.

“Why?” She looks at her hands. “Is something wrong with my nails?”

“No, I just know girls like that kind of thing and it’d be something to do that might make you feel better.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, maybe I will.” She gets in her car. “Bye, Theo.”

I go into the house and wait until she’s gone, then get back in my car and drive to the store to buy more holiday lights. They’re on clearance now and really cheap so I get more than I need in case some don’t work. I stop at the grocery store next and buy a box of sugar cookies, a can of frosting, and some red and green sprinkles. Next, I stop at a clothing store near campus

and buy Darcy a sweater. It's similar to one she already has, so I know she'll like it.

When I'm home, I race around putting up lights and getting the tree back in place. I suck at decorating, but I think I did a decent job making the place look festive. I text Darcy to see where she is, and she texts back that she's on her way home. I take one of the remaining strands of lights and hang them around the front door. It's a dark cloudy day so she'll see them when she drives up.

I watch from the window as she gets out of her car. She notices the lights around the door and looks around like she thinks she's at the wrong house. She slowly walks up to the door as I open it.

"Hey." I smile at her.

She points to the lights. "Were these here before?"

"No, I just put them up."

"Why? Christmas is over."

"Is it?" I step aside, letting her inside the house.

She gasps. "What is all this?"

"Christmas. We're celebrating it here since we both had a shitty Christmas with our families."

She turns to me and smiles. "You did this?"

"It wasn't a big deal. I just put up some lights and the tree."

"Theo, this is amazing." She walks farther into the room, taking her coat off. "There's so many lights. It's beautiful."

"Yeah, I kind of overdid the lights, but do you know how cheap they are this time of year? They were practically giving them away."

She tosses her coat on the chair and runs up to me, giving me a hug. "I love it. Thanks for doing this."

"I just wanted to cheer you up."

She lets me go and walks over to the tree. "You got ornaments?" She laughs. "Are those chile peppers? And tiny dogs?"

"Chihuahuas. It's all they had left. But they were wearing Santa hats so I got them." I go to the kitchen. "Oh, and we're frosting cookies." I hold up a sugar cookie. "If you want to. If not, we can just eat them."

She races over to me and sees everything set out on the counter. "You got sprinkles? Theo, this is so sweet. I can't believe you did all this."

"Hey, don't be saying I'm sweet. You'll ruin my reputation. I was just trying to give us a better Christmas than we had at home."

“I’ll go upstairs and change. I’ll be right back.”

She returns wearing a pair of black yoga pants and a cropped shirt. I’m trying really hard to not see her as anything more than my roommate and then she shows off her body like that and my mind goes back to the night we shared. We shouldn’t have done it, but we did, and now I have to find a way to live with her as just a friend.

“This was so much fun,” she says, biting into a cookie. We just finished decorating them, or Darcy did, while I watched and played her favorite Christmas songs from my phone. She kept dancing around the kitchen to the music, drawing my eyes to her body, which I was trying not to look at. But of course I did. I couldn’t help it. The way her ass looks in those pants is absolute perfection. Shit, now I’m thinking about that and my cock’s getting hard.

“Want a bite?” she asks, holding the cookie up to me.

My gaze drops to her tits, which I can see because her cropped shirt is really loose and she’s bending forward. She’s got on a push-up bra that makes her tits look huge. Fuck, she’s killing me. I want to bury my face in her tits, grab her ass and—

“You don’t want it?” she asks.

Fuck, yeah, I want it, but not the cookie. I want her. So damn bad.

“I’m good.” I walk away, hoping she didn’t notice the bulge in my jeans, although if she did, I wouldn’t care. She knows I’m attracted to her. I just can’t act on it.

“What’s that?” she asks as I return to the kitchen with a holiday bag.

“Your gift.” I hand the bag to her.

“Gift? But I didn’t get you anything.”

“I didn’t expect you to. I got presents when I was home. You didn’t. So I got you one.”

“Theo, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Go ahead and open it.”

She hops up on the counter, a huge smile on her face as she pulls the tissue paper from the top of the bag. She takes out the sweater and her eyes get big. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“This sweater.” She looks at me. “It’s the one I wanted. I didn’t get it because I didn’t want to spend the money. How’d you know I wanted it? Did Avery tell you?”

“No, I just picked it out. It looked like something you’d like.”

“I love it!” she says, holding it up. She sets it down on the counter. “Come here.”

I walk up to her. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.” She hugs me, still sitting on the counter.

I’m trying to keep my distance, but she pulls herself closer. I feel her tits pressing into my chest, her soft hair against my face, and get a whiff of her perfume.

It’s so damn tempting. We’re alone together. She looks fucking amazing. And she’s not letting me go. What does that mean? That she wants to do what I’m thinking?

I pull back slightly and lift my hand to the side of her face. Our eyes meet for just a moment, but it’s long enough to wipe away any doubts. I lean down and kiss her, my tongue slipping past her lips. She tightens her arms around my neck and wraps her legs around me. Shit, this is really happening. It’s what I wanted, but it’s a bad idea. A really bad idea. But it feels too damn good to stop.

I reach under her and grab her ass, lifting her off the counter.

“Theo,” she says, breathing hard. “We can’t.”

“Can’t what?” I ask, but I know what she’s about to say.

“We can’t do this.”

I set her back on the counter.

“Can we?” she asks, sounding desperate.

“We can do whatever we want.”

“I know, but we shouldn’t.” She bites her lip. “Right?”

“You can’t be asking me that.” I point to my cock pressing against my jeans. “Not with this happening. All I can think about is how much I want you right now.”

“I want that too, but... we can’t.” She hops off the counter and takes a few steps away from me. “If we did this, we’d want to keep doing it, and then we’d kind of be dating. And then what? What if we broke up? I’d have nowhere to live.”

“Then we won’t break up.”

“What are you saying?” She walks up to me. “That you think we should date?”

“Fuck, I don’t know.” I rub my face. “What do you want, Darcy? Just tell me.”

“I don’t want to lose your friendship. You’ve become one of my best friends and I don’t want to mess that up.”

“I don’t either.”

“So what do we do?”

I walk over to the couch and sit down.

“Theo, what are you doing? Why’d you walk away?”

“Because I can’t think straight when I’m close to you... after what almost happened.”

“Are you saying you can’t live with me anymore?”

“I’m saying I need a minute.”

Darcy comes over to the couch, but then sits on the chair. “It’s probably a bad idea.”

“Yeah,” I say, staring at the fake fireplace streaming on the TV. I put it on to add to the holiday mood. “I think it is too.”

“You do?”

I look at her. “You’re right. Us being together could end badly. Not just because we live together, but because we’ve become really good friends. I didn’t expect that to happen, but it did, and like you said, I don’t want anything messing that up.”

“So I guess that’s our decision. We’ll just be roommates. And friends.”

It’s not what I want, but I don’t know how to make this work without screwing it up. I don’t have a great history with relationships. My longest one was five months, and those five months weren’t great. I couldn’t seem to do anything right with her so we ended it. What if the same thing happens with Darcy? I don’t want to risk it. I like living with her. We have fun together. And I don’t want to lose her as a friend.

“I’m going to go try on my sweater,” she says, getting up. “You want to find a movie to watch?”

“I’m hungry. Why don’t we go get something to eat?”

“Okay.” She smiles. “I’ll wear my new sweater.” She runs upstairs to her room.

We can do this. We’ll just go back to how we were before we had sex. Maybe if we dated other people we’d stop seeing each other in a sexual way and it wouldn’t be so hard to live together without something happening.

“I’m ready,” Darcy says, running down the stairs. She changed into jeans, really tight ones, and she’s wearing the sweater I got her, which is cut lower in front that I thought it was when I held it up. It shows some cleavage, which

is not what I need to be seeing right now. “What do you think?” She spins around and my gaze drops to her ass in those jeans.

“Looks great!” I smile at her, then go to the closet to get my coat.

She looks better than great. She looks fucking hot. But I’m not letting my mind go there. We agreed to only be roommates. It’s for the best. Even if it doesn’t feel like it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DARCY

THEO and I have managed to make it almost two whole weeks without something happening, but it hasn't been easy. Like when he comes down to breakfast after his shower, not wearing a shirt and with his hair still wet. Or when he wears gym shorts around the house that are just tight enough that I can see the outline of his penis. I told myself I just have to get used to it or try to go back to seeing him like a brother, but it's hard to do that after having sex with him.

I finally told Avery we did it. She was so shocked she dropped her phone and accidentally hung up on me. She called back and made me tell her the whole story. I kind of lied and told her I was really drunk that night and not thinking straight. I didn't want her thinking I actually wanted to be with Theo. If I did, she'd tell me I should date him and then I'd have to explain why I can't, which means I'd have to tell her that Theo's kind of replaced her as my best friend and that I can't risk losing him.

Avery and I are still really good friends, but we've grown apart since she moved in with Wes. They spend all their time together, which I totally get, but it means I don't see her as much or talk to her everyday like I used to.

"What are you doing here?" I hear Theo say as I come down the stairs. I see him at the door, talking to Colton. "I thought you were coming back tomorrow."

"I changed my mind. My dad's anniversary is tomorrow and I wanted to give them some alone time." Colton comes into the house. "What's that smell?"

"Winter frost," I say, going to the couch to sit down. "It's a candle I got last week. It's a mix of cranberry and fir trees."

“And you’re okay with this?” Colton says to Theo as they go to the kitchen.

“It comes with living with a girl,” Theo says, opening the fridge. “They’re obsessed with candles. You want a beer?”

“Yeah, I’ll take one.”

Theo hands him a bottle and takes one for himself. It’s Saturday night and most of the team is back from winter break. We still have another week before classes start but people are already returning to town.

“How was your break?” I ask Colton as he sits on the other end of the couch.

“Good. My dads always have a million things planned, like they have to entertain me. I keep telling them I can do shit on my own, but they insist on taking me to plays and museums and whatever new restaurants they’re into.”

“Sounds fun! I haven’t been to the city for years. I love going to plays.”

Colton’s dads are both actors and well connected in the theater world. They can get tickets to plays that have been sold out for months.

“My dads could get you free tickets if you really want to go,” Colton says.

“I might take you up on that.” I smile at him.

“Just let me know.” He smiles back. It almost seems like he’s flirting with me, which he’s never done before. Just a few weeks ago, he couldn’t even remember my name.

“Colton,” Theo yells from the kitchen, “you want to eat? I’m making brats on the grill.”

“Yeah, I’ll have some.” Colton looks over at me. “What about you?”

“Oh, I already ate. So did Theo.” I look back at him in the kitchen. “What is this... your third dinner?”

“Second. I decided not to make the pizza after we watched the movie.”

Theo and I have watched movies together every single day. And we cook together. Eat meals together. Shop together. Other than when he goes to the gym, we’ve spent almost all our time together. That’ll change when classes start, but I’m going to miss it. I really like hanging out with him.

I get up. “I think I’ll go to my room.”

“Why don’t you stay?” Colton asks, with that flirty smile he gave me earlier.

“Um, okay.” I sit down, glancing back at Theo, but he left to go out to the grill.

“So what’s new?” Colton asks.

“Not much. I’ve just been doing stuff with Theo, getting ready for classes to start.”

“You got plans this week?”

“I’m going to lunch with Avery tomorrow, but other than that, not really.”

“What about tomorrow night? You want to go to dinner?”

“With you?”

He laughs. “Yeah. We could go to that Italian place downtown. You like pasta?”

“I love it. But um, just to be clear, will it just be you and me or is Theo coming too?”

“Just you and me.” He smiles. “I’m trying to ask you out here.”

“Oh!” My eyes dart around and my pulse races. Is this really happening? Did Colton just ask me out? Why now? All last semester he saw me at parties and never once flirted with me and now he wants to go out?

“So what do you think?” Colton asks.

“Yes! I mean, it sounds great!” I hear how high my voice sounds and feel my face heating up. Why did my voice get so high?

“It should be about 10 minutes,” Theo says, coming back into the house.

“Hey, Darcy and I are going to that Italian place tomorrow,” Colton says to Theo. “The one you took Erica to?”

I look at Theo in the kitchen and see him staring back at me.

“We just made plans,” I rush to say. “Colton suggested it.”

Why do I feel the need to explain myself to Theo? I’m not dating him. I’m single. I can go out with Colton. I don’t need Theo’s permission. But it feels weird telling him this, like I’m doing something wrong.

“You said you’re going tomorrow?” Theo asks, going to the fridge and taking out a beer.

“Tomorrow night,” Colton says. “Why? Did we have plans?”

“No, I just wondered.” Theo walks over to him, a beer in his hand. “You want to go to the gym in the morning?”

“Yeah, but not too early. Maybe around nine?”

“That works.” Theo glances at me. “We can do the lasagna some other night.”

That’s right. I forgot we bought the stuff to make lasagna. Theo was going to show me how. I’m a really bad cook so I asked Theo to teach me.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I forgot we were doing that.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll do it some other night.”

Now I feel bad. Theo doesn’t seem upset, but I know he’s disappointed. We’ve been talking about making lasagna all week and then I forgot. Now I feel guilty. Maybe I should cancel the date.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, getting up. I race up to my room, shut the door, and call Avery.

“Hey,” she answers. “I was just about to call you. What time do you want to meet for lunch tomorrow?”

“Noon? Or whatever works for you.”

“Noon is good. So what are you doing tonight?”

“Hanging out with Theo and Colton.”

“Colton’s back?”

“Yes, and he just asked me out. I told him yes, but now I feel guilty.”

“Why do you feel guilty?”

“Because of Theo. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“How could you hurt him? You’re not dating him.”

“I know, so why do I feel like this? Why do I feel like I’m doing something wrong?”

“You’re not doing anything wrong. Theo had a chance with you and he turned it down.”

“We both did. It wasn’t just him. We agreed to just be friends.”

“So there’s no reason to feel guilty about this. I know you have feelings for Theo, but if you two agreed to not let those feelings lead to anything more than a friendship, then you have to move on.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“You should be excited about this. You’ve wanted to go out with Colton for over a year.”

“I know, and before today he acted like I didn’t exist. I was shocked when he asked me out.”

“And you’re sure this is a date?”

“Yeah, he told me it was after I asked him if Theo was going.”

Avery laughs. “You really asked him that?”

“I was confused. I didn’t know what was happening. The guy showed no interest in me for months and then he suddenly asks me out? It didn’t make sense. It still doesn’t.”

“When’s the date?”

“Tomorrow night. I need help deciding what to wear. Can you come over

after lunch?”

“Sure. I think Wes will be there too. He was going to watch football with Theo tomorrow.”

“We were supposed to make lasagna tomorrow night. Theo was going to teach me how. But I totally forgot about that when Colton asked me out.”

“Can’t you just make lasagna another night?”

“Yes, but I feel bad that I’m cancelling on Theo.”

“Darcy, I know you guys are friends, but you need to stop spending all your time with Theo. You’ll never move on with someone else if you’re always doing things with a guy you’re never going to date.”

“It’s just that I really like spending time with him.”

“But the more time you spend with him, the more you’ll have feelings for him. I’m already worried you’re—” She stops suddenly.

“I’m what?”

“Nothing. Forget it. I just think you should spend time with someone you can actually date, assuming you still want a boyfriend.”

“I do, so maybe I shouldn’t go out with Colton. Theo keeps saying Colton doesn’t want anything serious.”

“Wes didn’t want anything serious and now we’re living together. Colton just has to meet the right girl. Maybe that’s you.”

“I better go. I told them I was coming right back.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I go downstairs and see Colton sitting on the barstool by the kitchen counter while Theo grabs some plates from the cabinet.

“Darcy,” Colton says. “Want a beer?”

“She’s more of a vodka or tequila type of girl,” Theo says.

Colton smiles at me as I walk over to him. “The hard stuff, huh?”

“Not all the time. I’ll have a beer.”

Theo takes one from the fridge and hands it to me. “You never drink beer.”

“Sometimes I do, and it sounds good tonight.”

“Colton, go check on the grill,” Theo says.

“I thought you were doing it.”

“I’m busy and the brats need to be turned.”

Colton gets up and goes out back to the grill.

“You really doing this?” Theo asks.

“Doing what?” I take a drink of my beer.

“Going out with Colton tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Why?”

Theo walks around the kitchen looking for something.

“What do you need?” I ask.

“The buns for the brats.”

“The cabinet next to the stove.” I walk over there just as Theo does, bumping into him.

“I got it,” he says, giving me this intense stare that almost feels angry.

I stare back at him. “Are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad?”

“For going out with Colton.”

He turns away and grabs the package of buns from the counter. “You can go out with whoever you want.”

“You seem mad.”

“I’m not mad,” he says, opening the package. “I’m annoyed you cancelled our plans, but now that I’m free, I can go out with Piper tomorrow night. Maybe I’ll take her to that new sports bar near campus.”

“Piper who?”

“I don’t know her last name. She’s tall. Thin. Has reddish blond hair.”

“Yeah, I know her. We’re friends.”

“Oh, yeah? Does she know we live together?”

“Yes, but she hasn’t been over here yet so you guys haven’t met. When did you see Piper?”

“Yesterday at the gym, the main one. The football gym had some kind of water leak so they shut it down.” He opens the fridge and takes out a jar of relish and some mustard. “Anyway, Piper was there and we started talking and she seemed really nice. I thought I’d ask her out.” He shuts the fridge and looks at me. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“If you ask Piper out? No, of course not. Why would I?”

Colton returns. “Brats are done. I need a plate.” He looks at me. “You okay? You look upset.”

“I’m fine.” I force out a smile.

“Here.” Theo hands him a plate.

Colton goes back outside.

“If you don’t want me asking your friend out, just tell me,” Theo says. “I’ll ask someone else.”

“You can ask her.” I gulp down what’s left of my beer.

“Hey, easy,” Theo says with a laugh. “I’m almost out.”

“I’m not having another. You can have what’s left.”

Colton returns with the brats. “Theo, you up for a game?” he asks, referring to the video game they play all the time.

“Yeah, when we’re done eating.”

“Let’s just eat while we play, like we always do.”

“It’s too messy. We’ll spill shit all over the couch.”

Colton laughs. “Since when do you care about making a mess?”

Theo glances at me, then back at Colton. “Let’s just eat at the counter.”

He doesn’t want to tell Colton he’s keeping the couch clean for me because he knows Colton would tease him about it. But it’s nice of Theo to do that for me. He’s changed so much since I moved in. Back then, he’d be on the couch with his brats, playing his game and spilling relish and mustard all over the place and not even caring about the mess. Now he does, because of me.

I wish I didn’t like him so much. If only I could go back to seeing him like a brother. Then it wouldn’t bother me that he’s going out with Piper, or any girl. But it *does* bother me, because I have feelings for him. Feelings I’m trying really hard to make go away.

“I’m tired,” I say. “I’m going to go to my room.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven,” Colton says, his mouth full because he just took a bite of his brat.

“That works.”

“Let me get your number.” He takes his phone out, unlocks it, and hands it to me. “Go ahead and put it in.”

I do, then hand him his phone back. “See you tomorrow.”

When I’m upstairs, I call Piper.

“Hey, Darcy,” she answers.

“Hey, when’d you get back?”

“Friday night. Didn’t you see my text?”

I check my phone. “Oh, sorry, no. I didn’t see it.”

“Any news with your parents?”

“They put the house up for sale. My mom thinks it will sell fast because it’s the only home for sale in our neighborhood.”

“Do you think you’ll go back before it’s sold?”

“No. I don’t need to. I packed up what I wanted to keep and it’s already in a storage unit. Oh, and they officially filed for divorce last week.”

“I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better? I could come over. Or I could pick you up and we could go somewhere.”

She’s a good friend and a really nice person. If Theo wants to date her, I should be happy for him. He’d be getting a great girl. So why am I angry about it? What’s wrong with me?

“I think I’ll stay home tonight,” I tell her. “Hey, Theo said he saw you at the gym yesterday.”

“Theo?”

“My roommate. Big guy. Football player. He said he talked to you at the gym.”

“That guy is your roommate?”

“Yeah, I told you about him. He’s good friends with Wes.”

“I guess I didn’t put it together that he’s your roommate. I don’t think he told me his name. We just talked for a few minutes and then he got back to his workout.”

“Do you like him?”

“He seemed nice. Why?”

“He’s going to ask you out, or he might.”

“Really? He said that?”

“Yeah, so what do you think? Do you want to go out with him?”

“Maybe. He’s really hot and I liked talking to him, but are you sure it’s okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Avery made it sound like there’s something going on with you and him.”

“There’s not. And why is Avery telling you about Theo and me?”

“I asked her if you two were getting along. This was weeks ago when I tried to call you and you didn’t pick up, so I called Avery.”

“Well, there’s nothing going on with Theo and me. We’re just friends.”

“Then I guess if he asks, I’ll go out with him.”

“Great!” I say, faking enthusiasm.

Piper’s going out with Theo. Maybe they’ll hit it off and start dating.

I should be happy about that. So why do I feel sad?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THEO

“I HEAR you’re going out with Piper tonight,” Wes says as I load up the barbell with more weight.

“Did Avery tell you that?” I ask.

“Yeah. She and Piper are good friends. Darcy and her are even better friends.”

I lay down on the bench. “You gonna spot me?”

“Yeah, but first I want to know what you’re up to.”

I sit up. “What do you mean?”

“Are you going out with Piper to make Darcy jealous?”

“No. I didn’t even know Piper was Darcy’s friend until Darcy told me.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“No! What the hell? Why would I lie about that?” I lay back down on the bench. “Why don’t you go yell at Darcy? She agreed to go out with Colton, knowing he’s one of my closest friends.”

“I thought you were okay with that. Eli said you told him she’s no longer off limits.”

“I didn’t have a choice. She’s single. She can date whoever she wants.”

“You should’ve been thinking that way weeks ago. You never should’ve told the guys to stay away from her.”

“Yeah, I get it. I was being stupid. I shouldn’t have done it.” I look up at him. “You better not tell Darcy about that.”

“I won’t, but someone else might.”

“Like who?”

“Eli. When he gets drunk, he spills everyone’s secrets.”

“Then I’ll keep him away from her.” I take the barbell off the rack while

Wes gets in place to spot me. I do a set with the weights, then put the bar back on the rack. “Add 20 more,” I say to Wes, but he’s turned away from the bench.

“Coach Hensley,” I hear Wes say.

“How are you doing, Wes?”

“Good. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

Curt was officially hired as the new assistant coach right after the new year. It was announced the following Monday. Coach Daley sent us all an email letting us know before it was announced to the entire school. We have a meeting tomorrow morning to officially welcome him to the team.

“Hey, Coach,” I say, getting up from the bench.

“Theo.” He motions to the barbell. “I see you bumped up the weight.”

“Yeah, you were right. I need to push myself more.”

Since getting hired, Curt’s been in the gym a lot, watching us train. It was mostly just me until the other guys starting coming back from break. It gave me time to get to know him better, or for him to get to know me. He hasn’t said much about himself, other than stuff about the team he coached before coming here. He has a lot of good ideas for making the team better. I really hope Coach Daley retires soon so Curt can take over as head coach.

“Just be careful,” Curt says. “You do too much too fast and you’ll do more harm than good. I’ve seen guys push too hard and tear a shoulder or blow out a knee.”

“Yeah, I’ll take it slow,” I tell him.

That’s another way Curt is different than Coach Daley. He actually cares about his players. Coach Daley doesn’t give a shit. Last year I had the flu and he still put me in the game. I had a fever and my whole damn body ached, but that asshole didn’t care.

“Hey, Coach,” Colton says, coming into the gym. He said he’d be here at nine and it’s after ten. He’s never on time, which makes me wonder if he’ll be late to pick up Darcy for their date. I was up all night thinking about her going out with him. I know I need to be okay with it, but I’m not.

“I’m going to head out,” I say to Wes.

“We’re not done,” he says.

“It’s getting late and I’ve got stuff to do. You still coming over later?”

“Yeah, probably around noon.”

I pass Colton on my way out but don’t say anything to him. I just keep going, out the door to the locker room. I shower, and as I’m getting dressed, I

think about what Wes said about Piper. I honestly didn't know she was Darcy's friend. I liked her when we were talking, but didn't plan on asking her out until Darcy agreed to go out with Colton. But I didn't do it to make Darcy jealous. I did it because I need to move on and go out with a girl I could actually date. I didn't think I wanted a girlfriend, but having Darcy in my life, I realize I do. I like what Darcy and I have, but I want more, and I want it with someone who could be my girlfriend.

"TONIGHT WAS FUN," Piper says as I walk her to her door. We went to dinner, then to a coffee place that has live music. The date was okay. We got along well and didn't have any lulls in conversation, but I didn't feel any sparks. "Thanks for dinner."

"Sure." I stand at her door, wondering if I should kiss her. Maybe I'd feel sparks if I did.

"Well, I'm gonna go," she says, opening her door.

"Piper, wait. Are you free later this week? Maybe we could go to a movie."

She hesitates. "Um, I would, but I don't think this is going to work."

"I thought you had fun tonight."

"I did, and I really like you, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't think you like me, at least not the way you'd like someone you're dating."

"If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have asked you out. I had a really good time tonight."

"Did you?" she asks, in a tone that implies I didn't.

"What's going on? What are you trying to tell me?"

"It's just that you seemed like you were somewhere else tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you were trying really hard to stay engaged and ask me questions, but your mind kept going elsewhere." She pauses. "Like maybe to Darcy?"

"Darcy?" I laugh. "Why would I be thinking about Darcy?"

"Because she's out with someone else tonight? Someone who's not you?"

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea here. I don’t know what Darcy told you, or Avery, or whoever made you think this, but there’s nothing going on with Darcy and me.”

“You sure about that?” She gives me a look like she knows something—something that refutes what I just said.

“Okay, yes, something might’ve happened between us, but we didn’t mean for that to happen and it’s ancient history.”

“Wait—are you saying you guys had sex?”

“I thought that’s what you meant.”

“No. I just thought maybe you guys kissed.” She shakes her head. “This is bad. I never should’ve gone out with you. I had no idea you guys were that close.”

“It was one time. I swear. And we agreed that was it. We wouldn’t do it again.”

“I’m sorry, Theo, but I can’t go out with you. Darcy’s a good friend and I don’t want to hurt her. And I can tell how much you like her. Why don’t you just tell her?”

“It’s not like that. Darcy is just a friend. I care about her, but it doesn’t work for us to be together.”

“I understand, but I still can’t go out with you.”

I nod. “Yeah. I get it.”

“Goodnight, Theo.” She goes into the house and shuts the door.

So much for a second date. Why does everyone keep thinking there’s something going on with Darcy and me? Just because we spend all our time together doesn’t mean we’re dating. She’s out with Colton tonight. And I was on a date with Piper. That should be enough to prove to people that Darcy and I are just friends.

When I get home, Darcy is still on her date. It’s after 10. I thought she’d be back by now. They were just going to dinner. That should only take an hour or two, so why isn’t she home? Did she go back to his place? Shit, what if she did? What if she’s in his room right now, in his bed?

I can’t think about that. And I shouldn’t. She can do what she wants. Am I angry she’s out with Colton? Hell, yeah, especially when she spent last semester telling Avery I was immature because I was messy and played video games. If she wants a mature guy, she shouldn’t be dating Colton. He’s even messier than me and plays video games more than I do. His grades are worse than mine, he hasn’t decided on a major, and he’s always late. He’s way more

immature than me, so why is Darcy dating him?

Just before midnight, I get into bed and turn on the TV. I told myself I wouldn't wait up for Darcy, but here I am, still awake and wondering when she'll be home. What if she spends the night with him? I'll fucking kill him. No, wait, I can't. She's single, and an adult. She can do what she wants, even if it drives me fucking crazy.

I hear a car outside, then the door downstairs opening. It slams shut and I hear loud footsteps running up the stairs, followed by banging on my door.

"Theo!" Darcy yells.

"It's open," I say.

The door swings open and Darcy storms up to my bed. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What?" I shove the covers off me and get up. "What'd I do?"

She puts her hands on her hips and scowls at me. "You told your friends they couldn't date me! You forbid them from asking me out!"

Shit. She knows.

"Darcy, that's not what I—"

"Don't even try to deny it. Colton told me what you said. Now I get why none of your teammates asked me out. I didn't understand. They'd smile at me, flirt with me, but not a single one asked me out. I thought there was something wrong with me." She throws up her hands. "I agonized over it, trying to figure out if it was something I said or did or how I looked. But no." She points her finger at me. "It was YOU! You're the reason none of them asked me out."

Why the hell did Colton tell her that? He knows I didn't want her knowing. Was he pissed at me for ignoring him at the gym today?

"If that were true," I say, folding my arms over my chest, "then how do you explain Colton asking you out?"

"He said you removed the ban last week."

"It wasn't a ban. I never came out and said they couldn't date you. A few of the guys asked if you were off limits and I didn't tell them no. They assumed that meant they couldn't go out with you."

"Why would you do that? Why would you let them think I'm off limits?"

"Because I don't think those guys are good enough for you."

"Oh, please." She rolls her eyes. "Just be honest, Theo. You didn't want them dating me because you wanted me all to yourself. And when you realized dating me was a bad idea, you still didn't want them dating me. It

wasn't until Colton pointed out what a selfish jerk you were being that you finally lifted the ban."

I shrug. "If that's what you want to believe, go ahead."

"Are you saying it's not true? Then what's the truth, Theo? Tell me. Tell me why you did it."

"I tried, but you wouldn't listen."

"Because your teammates aren't good enough for me? That's bullshit. Any of those guys would be better than some guy who's been lying to me this whole time, making me think there's something wrong with me."

"Why are you yelling at me about this? You got what you wanted. You're dating Colton, the guy you've wanted for over a year."

"You're right. I am." She stands up straighter. "And we're going out again on Wednesday. But that's not the point." She pauses, her eyes on mine. "I trusted you, Theo. I thought you were a nice guy. I never in a million years would've thought you'd go behind my back and tell your friends to stay away from me, especially when you knew how much I wanted to date Colton. I told you how I didn't get why nobody at the party asked me out. You could've told me then what you'd done instead of letting me think it was about me. But you didn't. You're not the guy I thought you were." She walks out of my room and down to her own, slamming the door shut.

I call Colton.

"Yeah?" he answers.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You told Darcy I didn't want you dating her?"

"I didn't mean to. She asked why it took me so long to ask her out. I said something about you telling the team to stay away from her. I said it like I was joking. I didn't know she'd get all upset about it."

"Well, she did, and now she fucking hates me."

"Just explain why you did it."

"I tried to, but she wouldn't listen. She thinks I did it because I wanted her for myself."

"You did."

"That's not why I did it. It's because you and Eli and whoever else was checking her out at the party that night aren't looking for a relationship. But Darcy is, so I didn't want her wasting her time with you guys."

"But it's okay for you to waste her time?"

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

“You had sex with her with no intention of it being anything more. How is that any different than what you assumed I would do? Or Eli?”

“How do you know I had sex with her?”

“I overheard Avery talking to Wes about it.”

So much for keeping it a secret.

“I didn’t plan on that happening,” I say. “It just did. And Darcy wanted it as much as I did.”

“So maybe you’re wrong about her only wanting a relationship. Maybe you should stay the fuck out of it and let her make her own decisions.”

“Thanks to you she won’t be talking to me anymore, so yeah, she’s on her own. She can go date the whole damn team if that’s what she wants.” I pace the floor, my face getting hot, my muscles tight. “I’m done talking about this. Just don’t fucking hurt her, okay?”

“It’s not too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“To get her back. Let her cool down, then talk to her tomorrow. Beg her to give you another chance.”

“Chance for what? We never went out. And she’s dating you. She’s wanted to date you for over a year.” I blow out a breath. “I’m so damn sick of hearing about how great you are and how much she wants to be with you.”

“She didn’t act like that tonight.”

I stop pacing. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like she wasn’t really there, like her mind was somewhere else. If she liked me, she would’ve at least shown some interest in what I was saying, but instead she kept spacing out and asking me to repeat myself.”

“She’s probably just tired.”

“Does she do that with you?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah, actually it does.”

“If she wasn’t into you, she wouldn’t have agreed to go out with you again.”

“Unless she was trying to make you jealous.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t care about that now. She hates me. I wouldn’t be surprised if she moved out.”

“She has nowhere to go. There aren’t any apartments open this time of year.”

“She’d rather sleep in her car than be with me. Trust me, if you saw how

angry she was when she got home tonight, you'd know what I mean."

"I could try to talk to her."

"No. You've done enough damage. Next time you see her, don't even talk about me. Just let me handle it. I'll try to figure out a way to fix this."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to cause problems."

"Yeah, I know," I say, the anger I had toward him now turning back to myself. I can't blame Colton for this. I'm the one who told the team to stay away from her and now I'm paying for it.

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm in the kitchen making breakfast when Darcy comes down the stairs. It's only eight. I didn't think she'd be up this early. Her hair's pulled back in a messy bun and she's wearing her short pink robe. Even first thing in the morning she looks sexy. I try not to think about that and focus on how to get her to talk to me.

"Hey," I say as she walks past me to the coffee maker.

She ignores me, along with the mug I set out for her. I don't drink coffee, but she does, so I made it for her and was going to leave a note by it before I left, telling her to have a good day. It wasn't much, but it was my first attempt to make her not hate me.

"You want some eggs?" I ask, pointing to the skillet of scrambled eggs I just made. "Or I could make you pancakes."

She opens the cupboard, takes out a mug, and fills it with coffee.

"Guess that's a no," I say with a laugh.

She doesn't even smile. She goes to the fridge, takes out the milk, pours some in her coffee, then puts the milk back.

"I could go get you something," I say. "Bagels? Donuts? Whatever you want."

She takes her coffee and leaves, going back upstairs without even acknowledging me. She really hates me. And I don't know what to do to get her to forgive me.

Maybe this is it for us. Maybe we can't even be friends. I lost her trust and it might be too late to get it back.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEO

“THEO,” Curt yells as I’m leaving the gym.

I turn back. “Yeah?”

“Meet me in my office after you’ve cleaned up.”

“Yeah, okay,” I tell him, wondering why he wants to meet.

“What’d you do?” Eli jokes.

I shove his shoulder. “Shut up. You get called into the office all the damn time.”

“With Coach Daley, yeah,” he says as we head to the locker room. “Not with the new guy.”

“Maybe he wants to tell me how great I am,” I say with a smirk.

Eli laughs. “Yeah, right.”

He goes to his locker while I go to mine in the next row. Wes is at the locker beside mine, looking at his phone.

“You want to meet up later?” I ask. “We could go to lunch.”

He looks up from his phone. “I can’t. I’m going with Avery.”

“And I can’t tag along?” I say with a laugh. “It’s just lunch. And I haven’t seen Avery for awhile.”

“Today isn’t good. Maybe tomorrow.”

I open my locker. “I get it. You’re going with Darcy.”

He sighs. “Avery invited her. I would’ve just told you, but I wasn’t sure if I should bring her up.”

“You can talk about her.” I shut the locker and turn to Wes. “I live with her. It’s not like I can avoid her.”

“She still won’t talk to you?”

“No, and she probably won’t. I fucked up, and nothing I do or say seems

to help. She hates me.”

“It’s only been a couple days. You need to give her more time. And she doesn’t hate you. She’s just disappointed. You guys were getting really close and she trusted you. Now she feels like she can’t.”

“But that’s not fair. Other than that one time, I’ve been completely honest with her. I don’t know why me not telling her what I did negates everything else.” I lower my voice. “I’ve told her things I haven’t even told you. About my mom and all the shit that happened when I went home and how my dad taking off affected me. I’ve been more open with her than anyone else, but somehow that doesn’t matter. She still wants to end our friendship because of this one little thing.”

“To her, it’s not little. It’s a big deal. And you haven’t been completely honest with her.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew the things I’ve told her. I shared my damn feelings with her, feelings I don’t even like to admit I have.”

“About her?”

“Well, no. About other stuff, like my family.”

“She needs to know how you feel about *her*. That’s where you’re not being honest. You need to tell her how you really feel and stop doing this we’re-just-roommates shit.”

“We agreed that’s all we are.”

“But you’re not. You two are more than roommates but you’re both too damn stubborn to admit it.” He pauses and smiles at someone behind me. “Hey.”

I turn and see Zane there. “You guys coming to the party Friday?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” Wes answers.

“I might skip it,” I say to Zane.

“You can’t.” He smiles. “There’s this girl coming that really wants to meet you. She’s in my Spanish class. Really fucking hot.”

“He’ll think about it,” Wes says.

“Let me know.” Zane walks off.

“You can’t miss the party,” Wes says to me. “It’s the first one of the semester.”

“You really think I want to go there and see Colton and Darcy hanging all over each other? Yeah, I think I’ll pass.”

“I don’t think she’ll be going with Colton.”

“Why? Did something happen? Did she cancel their date tonight?”

“No, they’re still going out. But Theo, she doesn’t want Colton.”

“Have you not heard her talking about him? She’s been obsessed with him since last year.”

“And then she met someone she likes better and now Colton’s not as great as she thought.”

“She met someone else? Already?”

He shoves my arm. “I’m talking about you, idiot. Seriously, why are you not getting this?”

“Getting what?”

“That Darcy wants *you*, not Colton.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Darcy won’t even talk to me. And she has a date tonight with Colton.”

“Because she doesn’t think you want her.”

I throw my hands up. “I’ve been doing everything possible to get her to forgive me. I’ve brought home her favorite foods. Left flowers outside her door. Told her I’m sorry about a million times.”

“That’s not telling her you want her. That’s telling her you want her to stop being mad at you. It’s about you, not her. You’re sick of feeling guilty for what you did and you want it to end.”

“Yeah, so what am I supposed to do?”

“Be honest about what you want. Tell her you want to date her and not just be roommates.”

“But we agreed—”

“I don’t give a shit what you agreed to. Tell her anyway.”

“Why is this all on me? Why doesn’t she tell me how *she* feels?”

“I agree. She needs to. You both need to stop hiding how you feel about each other and just say it.”

“I don’t know, Wes,” I say, rubbing my jaw. “The whole reason we’ve avoided getting involved with each other is because we know what could happen if we break up. She’s become one of my closest friends. I don’t want to lose her.”

“But isn’t that what’s already happening by not being honest with her?”

He’s right. The longer Darcy and I go without talking, the more chance I have of losing her. If I don’t figure this out soon, I might lose her for good.

“I’ll think about it,” I say. “I need to go clean up. I’m supposed to meet Curt in his office.”

“What’d you do?” Wes asks, a slight smile on his face.

“Why does everyone assume I’m in trouble?” I walk past him and go to the showers.

When I get to Curt’s office, he stands up from his desk. “Theo, have a seat.”

“Am I in trouble?” I say, laughing a little as I take a seat.

“Not at all,” he says, pulling a chair up next to me. Coach Daley always talked to us from behind his desk. My high school coach did too. But I’ve noticed Curt does a lot of things differently than other coaches. He almost feels like one of the guys, like he’s with us on the team instead of a coach who just bosses us around.

“I’m worried you’ve been spending too much time in the gym,” he says.

I laugh. “Are you joking?”

“You’re spending hours a day here. That’s too much. You’re putting yourself at risk for injuries.”

“Yeah? That’s normal for athletes. Push hard. Play hard. Ignore the pain. Coach Daley tells us that all the time.”

“Yes, I know, but I don’t agree with it. You play at your best when you feel your best, not when your body is stiff and in pain. I want you to cut back to no more than two hours a day. And I want you to take tomorrow off to rest.”

I laugh again. “Seriously, is this a joke? Are there cameras on us?”

“Theo, I’m not joking. I want you to cut back before you hurt yourself.”

“And Coach Daley’s good with that? Because I’m pretty sure he’d get you fired if he heard you saying this. He’s always telling us to do more hours in the gym, not less.”

“Don’t worry about Coach Daley. Worry about what’s best for you.” He glances at my knee. “I noticed you trying not to put weight on that knee today. Does it hurt?”

“Maybe a little, but it’s not a big deal. I just overdid it on the leg press yesterday.”

“Which is why you need to rest and cut back on your time in the gym.”

“Sorry, but I can’t do it. I’m trying to get stronger. And working out is how I relieve stress.”

He eyes me with concern. “What are you stressed about?”

“Just the usual. Classes starting next week. Finding time to study with everything else that’s going on.”

“What else is going on? Besides your football training?”

I shrug. "I don't know. I just got a lot going on."

He pauses. "Does the stress you're feeling have to do with your mother?"

I wish I hadn't told him about her. I shared too much, and now he's treating me differently because of it.

"It's not about my mom. It's just the new semester. It stresses me out. If I agree to take tomorrow off, are we good?"

He leans toward me. "Theo, I'm not just your coach. I'm someone you can talk to. What happens off the field often affects what happens *on* the field. If something's bothering you, you can tell me."

I sigh, knowing he's not going to let this go until I tell him something. "It's Darcy. My roommate. We had a fight. A few days ago."

"And she's still upset with you?"

"Yeah, she won't talk to me."

"Can you tell me what the fight was about?"

I hesitate, then say, "Before winter break, the team had a party and Darcy was there. She looked really hot and the guys were all checking her out. I kind of told them she was off limits. And last weekend she found out."

"And she's angry you did this because at the time, you two weren't dating. Is that the issue?"

"We never dated. We've always just been friends. The reason she's angry is because I let her think she was the reason none of the guys asked her out at the party. She thought she said or did something wrong. And hey, I get why she's mad. I was out of line. I shouldn't have done it, or I at least should've told her I did. But I didn't, and now she doesn't trust me. She won't even talk to me. It's made it really awkward to live with her so I've been spending all day at the gym. It gets me out of the house and burns off some stress."

He nods. "I understand. Trust me, I've made plenty of mistakes with women. But sometimes there's nothing you can do. You can't force her to forgive you."

"I get that. I just don't know how we're going to live together for the rest of the semester. I already can't take all the tension between us and it's only been a few days."

"Can I ask why you two never dated? Every time I've seen you with her, you seem to get along really well."

"We get along great. We didn't at first, when she moved in, but as we hung out more, we got to be really good friends. We agreed not to be anything more than that because of the roommate thing. If we broke up and

she moved out, she'd have nowhere to go, at least not now. Nobody needs a roommate this time of year."

"And you've tried talking to her?"

"Yes, and she won't listen. So now I'm just leaving her alone."

"That's a tough situation. I wish I could offer you some advice, but I'm not great when it comes to romantic relationships."

"You ever been married?"

"I came close, but it didn't work out."

"And no kids?"

He looks down, then back up at me. "I have one. He's grown now." Curt stands up. "I should get back to work. I have a meeting with Coach Daley in a few minutes."

I get up and walk to the door.

"Theo, I mean it about taking a break tomorrow."

"Yeah, got it."

He comes over to me. "And about this situation of yours, just make sure you don't have any regrets. They make it hard to move on with your life." He opens the door. "Stop by if you ever want to talk."

"Yeah, okay." I leave his office and go out to my car. I'm not sure how I feel about that talk. It's nice that Curt wants to help his players, but it feels too personal to me. Maybe it's because I'm not used to it. All my other coaches have only talked to me about football. They've never talked to me about anything else, not even my classes. I feel like I overshared again, but the guy kept asking me questions.

On my way home, I call Wes.

"Hey, what's up?" he answers. "You done with your meeting?"

"Yeah, he told me to cut back on my workouts."

"Coach Hensley told you that? Was this a joke?"

"I said the same thing. This guy's nothing like Coach Daley. He was all worried about me, saying he doesn't want me getting hurt."

"That's good. It's just unusual."

"He was also asking all this personal stuff. That's why I'm calling. I was wondering if he's ever asked you about your family or Avery."

"He asked about Avery, but only because he's seen me with her a few times."

"Then maybe that's just how he is. I'm not used to it. I'm not used to a coach asking about my personal life."

“He told us he likes to get to know his players. I guess asking questions is his way of doing that. But if you’re not comfortable telling him stuff, then don’t.”

“Too late. I already told him about my mom and now I regret it. I didn’t want him knowing that shit.”

“Then why’d you tell him?”

“Because he’s easy to talk to and he listens. And he can tell when something’s bothering me.”

“Why are you worried about it? It’s not like it’s a secret. You’ve told a lot of people.”

“I guess you’re right. It doesn’t matter. I’ll let you go. I’m almost home. I have to prepare for whatever’s waiting for me inside. Darcy’s probably poisoning my food.”

Wes laughs. “Just give her time. Things will get better.”

When I go into the house, Darcy’s not there. I go upstairs and hear her in her room. I almost knock on her door, but then decide not to. Begging her to talk to me isn’t working. Flowers and gifts aren’t either. At this point, I don’t know if anything will work or if I just have to accept that it’s over with us.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DARCY

“ISN’T it time to end this?” Avery asks as we’re having lunch. “Haven’t you punished Theo enough?”

“I’m not punishing him. I just don’t feel like talking to him. I’m not ready to.”

“Why? What’s holding you back?”

“I don’t trust him. How can we be friends if I can’t trust him?”

“But you can. What he did was wrong, but he didn’t do it to hurt you. It was one of those stupid things guys do to defend their territory.”

“Territory? I’m a person. Not a piece of land.”

“You know what I’m saying. Theo saw you as being his—and yes, I know that’s wrong, but hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

“No matter what Theo says or what he tells himself, he wants to be with you. He just doesn’t know how because you guys have that rule about not dating your roommate.”

“So if he can’t date me, nobody can? That’s just wrong.”

“I think he was holding out hope that you two could find a way to date and still be roommates. But that hope would’ve been gone if one of his teammates asked you out that night.”

“He could’ve just told me that.”

“It was too soon. You’d just started living together. He was still trying to figure out his feelings for you and you were the doing the same with him.”

“Don’t be bringing me into this. I didn’t go tell girls at the party that Theo was off limits.”

“Darcy, you’ll never make up with Theo if you can’t let go of this. He

made a mistake. You both did.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You’ve been lying to him about how you feel. We both know you like him.”

“As a friend.”

She looks at me, waiting for me to fess up.

“Okay, fine, I like him. Or I did. I don’t anymore.”

“Really? You just shut off your feelings for him? Just like that?”

I don’t answer her.

“Remember last fall how you kept telling me I liked Wes and I kept denying it?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“You’re doing the same thing with Theo.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is, except it’s even more obvious with you and Theo. At least I was better at pretending I didn’t like Wes.”

“I never said I didn’t like Theo. But liking him doesn’t mean I want to date him.” I get my wallet out to pay the bill.

“So you’re okay if he goes out with Piper again?”

I look at Avery. “They’re going out again?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to her. But if they do, will it bother you?”

“Of course not.” I take some money from my wallet and set it on the table. “Ready to go?”

“Just talk to him. You two should at least go back to being friends.”

“That’s all we ever were. I don’t know why everyone’s acting like we broke up when we weren’t even dating.”

“What if you did?”

“Did what?”

“What if you dated Theo?”

“No. I’m not going to risk ending up with no place to live.”

“Theo wouldn’t kick you out. And if he did, you could stay with Wes and me. You could stay in that room we’re using for storage.”

“Wes wouldn’t be okay with that.”

“Sure he would. It wouldn’t be permanent. Just until you find something else.” She smiles. “There. I just eliminated your excuse for not dating Theo.”

“Except Theo’s dating Piper and I’m going out with Colton.” I scoot out of the booth. “It’s not happening so stop trying to get us together.”

We leave the restaurant and Avery goes home while I drive to Piper's house. I'm just stopping by to say hi. It has nothing to do with Theo.

When I get to the house, Jasmine, one of Piper's roommates, answers the door. "Hey, Darcy."

"Hey, is Piper here?"

"Yeah, come on in." I go into the house.

Piper comes down the stairs. "Hey, Darcy."

"Hey. I just thought I'd stop by and say hi since I haven't seen you since you got back."

"Let's go sit down." She heads to the couch and sits on the end.

I take the other end, noticing the awkwardness between us. Piper won't look at me and she didn't give me a hug. She always hugs me when she sees me.

"Have you been busy?" I ask. "I haven't heard from you since last weekend."

"I wasn't sure if you were still talking to me," she says, her voice breathy like she's nervous.

"Why wouldn't I talk to you?"

"Because of Theo. Darcy, I swear I didn't know you guys were that serious. You kept saying you two were just friends."

"We are. Or we were. We had a fight and aren't talking right now."

"You're not fighting about me, are you? Because I told Theo I'm not going out with him again."

"You're not?"

"No, and nothing happened on our date. We didn't even kiss."

I move over on the couch, closer to her. "Piper, relax. I'm not upset that you went out with Theo. He can date whoever he wants."

"Are you sure?" she asks, like she doesn't believe me.

"Yes. Did you really think I was mad at you?"

"I thought you were avoiding me. I went over to your house to talk to you but you weren't there so I asked Theo to tell you to call me. When you didn't, I thought that meant you were angry at me."

"Theo didn't tell me you stopped by." I pause. "Or maybe he tried, but I ran off before he could. I haven't been talking to him since our fight."

"What was it about?"

"I don't want to get into it. I just spent the last hour talking about it with Avery. Let's talk about something else."

We talk for the next hour, the awkwardness between us gone now that we cleared things up about Theo. Good thing I stopped by or Piper would still be thinking I'm mad at her for dating him. I was never mad, more like annoyed. At Theo. I felt like he was only going out with her to get back at me for going out with Colton.

Speaking of Colton, I have a date with him tonight. A few weeks ago, I would've been thrilled about that. Colton was my dream guy. But now I'm starting to think he's not. He talks about sports constantly and is even messier than Theo. He knew I was going to his house after dinner but didn't even bother to clean the place up.

Our date the other night was okay, but not great. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just let Colton talk. And then my mind kept wandering to Theo. I'm sure Colton could tell I wasn't listening to whatever he was saying.

At seven, he picks me up to go to dinner. Theo was in his room, but I still went outside to wait for Colton, thinking it'd be weird for him to come into the house to get me for our date. Even though I'm still upset with Theo, I feel kind of bad dating his friend, like it's wrong even though it's not.

"You ready for classes to start?" Colton asks when we're at the restaurant.

I'm sitting across from him, wondering why I'm not having that nervous, excited feeling I get when I'm really into a guy. Colton is gorgeous, with a face like a male model and a lean, muscular body. Just looking at him should be turning me on, so why isn't it?

"Darcy." Colton waves his hand in front of me. "You still there?"

"Yeah." I take my napkin and set it on my lap. "So what'd you do today?"

Colton leans back in his chair and sighs. "You want to just leave?"

"Leave? We just got here."

"Yeah, and you didn't hear anything I just said."

"Sorry. I didn't sleep well last night."

"You were like this last time we went out too. Why don't you just admit you'd rather be with Theo?"

"Theo?" I laugh. "I'm not even talking to him."

"You should. You need to end this fight you guys are having and work things out. Even if you don't want to date him, at least go back to being friends."

I look down at the table. “I don’t know if we can.”

“You won’t know unless you try. But if I were you, I wouldn’t keep waiting. Theo’s a great guy and he’s ready for a serious relationship. If it’s not with you, it’s going to be with someone else.”

I look at Colton. “He told you that? That he’s ready for a serious relationship?”

“Yeah, so if you want a chance with him, you better hurry up.”

I shove my chair back. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, you’re doing this now?”

“You told me to hurry.”

“Okay.” He laughs a little. “I’ll take you home.”

He pulls into the driveway and I open the door to get out, but then turn back to Colton. “It’s not that I don’t like you. In fact, I’ve had a huge crush on you since that class we had together last year.”

“Oh yeah?” He smiles a little. “I didn’t notice.”

“I might’ve even learned your schedule so we’d have a chance of running into each other.” I cringe. “I can’t believe I just told you that.”

“You’re not the first girl to do that. It comes with playing football.”

“And looking like that.” I motion to him.

He laughs. “So you went from that to ending our date before it even started. That’s gotta tell you something.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I smile at him. “Thanks for understanding.”

“Sure.” He nods at the house. “Get in there and talk to him. This has gone on long enough.”

I get out of the car and go into the house.

“Theo, are you—” I stop when I see Theo in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with Erica in front of him, his arms around her. “Oh, sorry.” I look away and race to the stairs.

“I thought she was out tonight,” I hear Erica say.

“She was supposed to be,” Theo says.

I hurry down the hall to my room and shut the door. I’m too late. Theo’s already moved on, with Erica. Colton was right when he said if I didn’t hurry, Theo would find someone else. I just didn’t think it’d be this soon.

THE NEXT MORNING, I go downstairs expecting to find Theo making breakfast, but the kitchen is empty. There aren't even any dirty dishes. It's after nine. Theo's usually having his second breakfast by now.

I get the coffee maker going, then walk to the living room, stopping when I see a red sweater draped over the end of the couch. The same red sweater Erica was wearing last night. Does that mean she's here? With Theo? Did she spend the night?

My stomach knots up and I feel anxious and jittery. I race upstairs to my room to change out of my pajamas. I need to go somewhere. I can't be here when they get up. I don't want to see Theo with Erica, not after I finally admitted to myself how much I like him.

I throw on jeans and a sweatshirt and race back downstairs. I grab my coat and race out to my car. As I'm driving down the street, I call Avery.

"Hello?" she answers, sounding like she just woke up.

"Hey, want to meet me for breakfast?"

"What time is it?"

"A little after nine. Were you asleep?"

"Yeah. I don't work this morning."

"Oh. Sorry. So that's a no on breakfast?"

"Darcy, what's going on? You sound weird."

I pull over to the side of the road. "It's Theo. Last night I found him with Erica. And she's still there. In his room."

"Does Piper know this?"

"He's not dating Piper. I talked to her and she said they decided not to go out again."

"Okay, so what are you saying? That Theo can't date Erica?"

"Well, no, he can date whoever he wants but—" I take a breath. "I wanted it to be me."

"Wait, I'm confused. Weren't you out with Colton last night?"

"Yes, and I realized I want Theo. As more than a friend."

"Finally," Avery says. "It took you long enough."

"Yeah, but now he has someone else."

"Are you sure? What exactly did you see?"

"Erica with her hands all over him. They were in the kitchen when I got home last night. Theo had his arms around her. It looked like they were kissing before I walked in. And then this morning, I saw her sweater on the couch. Theo was still in his room with her so I got out of there before they

woke up. Go ahead and say I told you so. I know you want to.”

“I’m not going to say that, but I do think you waited too long to talk to him.”

“That’s the same as saying you told me so.”

“Maybe it’s not as bad as you think. Maybe he doesn’t really like her. Maybe it was just sex.”

“Really? That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Hey, I just woke up. My brain isn’t working yet. Why don’t you come over and we’ll talk? It’ll just be us. Wes is at the gym.”

I go to her house, but find that I can’t talk about Theo. I’m too upset. I keep imagining him with Erica and then want to slap myself for letting our fight go on for so long and not telling him how I feel.

At noon, I leave Avery’s house and go to the mall, just to kill time in case Erica is still at the house. If Theo’s dating her, I’ll have to get used to her being there, but I’m not at that point yet. Just seeing her sweater on the couch had me so enraged I had to leave the house. She is so not the girl for him. They have nothing in common. She’s gorgeous, so I see why Theo likes her, but she’s not at all his type.

I guess I can’t say that since I don’t really know her, but I want it to be true so I’m choosing to believe it. I don’t want Theo to be with Erica, or any other girl. I want him to be with me. But I screwed up. Theo tried to apologize, over and over again, but I wouldn’t listen. I was stubborn and stupid. So maybe I deserve this. Maybe I deserve to lose the only guy I’ve ever loved.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THEO

“WE’VE MISSED YOU,” my mom says, giving me a hug as she comes into the house.

It’s Saturday and my family is on their way to New York City to see a play and go shopping. Ella loves the city and begged my parents to take her there this weekend. Whenever they go there, they always stop to see me since it’s on the way.

“I didn’t miss him,” Ella says, smiling a little.

“Liar,” I say, pulling her in for a big bear hug.

“I can’t breathe,” she says, dramatically.

“I’ll let you go if you promise to stop dating that Ace guy.”

“That was over weeks ago,” my dad says.

I let go of Ella. “Are you with someone else now?”

“No. I’m taking a break from guys, at least high school guys. They’re so immature. I want to date college guys.”

“When you’re in college, yes,” my dad says. “Not now.”

“College is only a few months away,” Ella says.

“She’d like to walk around campus before we leave,” my mom says to me. “Do you want to come with us?”

“I have to. I gotta make sure Ella doesn’t ask out a college guy.”

“You’re going to have your hands full next year,” my dad says. “Keeping this one in line.” He puts his arm around Ella.

“I’ll probably never see him,” Ella says, “with me living in the dorms and him way out here.”

“We’ll see each other plenty,” I say. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Ella rolls her eyes. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

Having Ella here next year is going to be a nightmare. I don't have time to keep an eye on her, but if I don't, who the hell knows what kind of trouble she'll get in? Her choice in guys already causes me stress and I'm only basing that on what she's told me about them. I'll be even more stressed when she's here and I actually meet the guys she goes out with.

"Did you pick a place for lunch?" my mom asks. She looks good today, a lot better than she did at Christmas. If she's been drinking, I can't tell, which means she didn't have much. My dad said she's been going out more and doing stuff with friends during the day instead of staying home drinking. I'm not getting my hopes up. She's done this before, where she cuts back for a few weeks and then goes back to drinking too much.

Avery comes down the stairs. "Hi!" She smiles at my family as she hurries over to the coffee table and picks up a book. "I just left my book down here. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's Avery," I say to my parents. "My roommate. Avery, come say hi."

Avery and I are talking again, but not like we used to. She's very formal with me, like she's my tenant who's just here to rent out a room. I'm hoping as more time passes we'll go back to how we were, if that's even possible. It might be too late for that, but I'd at least like us to hang out again, even if it's just watching a movie on the couch. I miss spending time with her.

"Nice to meet you," my dad says, smiling at Darcy. "We've heard a lot about you."

"You have?" She looks at me.

"I told them how much you love Christmas. I had to explain why I was taking so many photos when I was home."

"I hire a company every year to decorate," my mom says to Darcy. "They do a wonderful job."

"The photos were beautiful," Darcy says.

"I'm Sherry, Theo's mom." She shakes Darcy's hand.

"And I'm his sister," Ella says.

"Theo said you're going here next year," Darcy says.

"That's the plan." Ella smiles at me. "Theo can't wait."

"Yeah, it'll be great," I mutter.

"We were just heading to lunch," my dad says to Darcy. "Would you like to join us?"

"Oh, no thank you. I'm trying to get myself organized for class on

Monday.”

“Well, it was good to finally meet you,” my dad says.

“You too.” She smiles at my family before racing back upstairs.

“That’s the girl you’re dating?” Ella asks.

“We’re not dating. She’s my roommate.”

“She’s really pretty. You should date her.”

“I’m not dating her, and stop talking about her.”

“So it’s okay for you to tell me who to date, but I can’t tell you?”

“Yeah, that’s how it works.”

“Why don’t we eat at this cafe?” my mom says, showing me her phone.

“We haven’t been there and it has good ratings.”

“Yeah, it’s new. It’s really popular. It might be hard to get a seat, but we could try.”

We go to the restaurant and get the last open table. My mom talks all through lunch, which she never does when she’s been drinking. And she didn’t order wine like she usually would. Maybe me taking off after Christmas bothered her enough that she cut back on drinking. My dad said she was really upset when I left, but he supported me for doing it. He understands I don’t want to see her like that.

“We need to get going,” my dad says, checking his watch.

“You sure you don’t want to come with us?” my mom asks me.

“No, I already have plans.”

“With your roommate?” Ella asks in a tone that implies I’m dating Darcy.

“I’m going to Colton’s house. He’s having some people over.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?” Ella asks.

“Darcy? No. She went out with Colton a few times, but it didn’t work out.”

She didn’t tell me why. Neither did Colton. I haven’t asked him about it because I’m trying to stay out of it. Interfering with Darcy’s love life is what ended our friendship.

As we’re getting up to leave, I spot Curt at the hostess stand.

“Hey, my new coach is here,” I say to my parents. “I want you guys to meet him.”

They follow me over to where Curt is standing as he waits for a table.
“Coach Hensley.”

He smiles. “Theo. I didn’t see you at the gym today.”

“Yeah, I was there early. Hey, I wanted you to meet my family.”

As I step aside, I notice Curt's expression go from relaxed to panicked.

"Curt?" my mom says.

"Sherry," he says, sounding as panicked as he looks. "I can explain."

She shoves past me to Curt. "I told you to stay away from him!"

"What's going on here?" my dad asks, coming up behind my mom. "How do you know this man?"

"Yeah, how do you know Coach Hensley?" I ask.

"Let's take this outside," Curt says, lowering his voice. He turns and walks out the door.

My mom storms after him. "Yes, run away! Just like you did before!"

"What the hell's going on?" I ask my dad.

"I don't know," he says, concern in his voice.

We follow my mom outside and watch as she stops in front of Curt. "I'm calling the police. You are not to be anywhere near my son! How dare you show up here, pretending to be his coach!"

"Mom, he's not pretending," I say, walking up to them. "He's the new assistant coach." I look at Curt. "What's going on? How do you know my mom?"

"Tell him," my mom says. "Tell him the truth."

Curt's eyes dart from my mom to me. "I was going to tell you. I just wanted more time."

"Tell me what? What's going on?"

"Your mother and I knew each other in high school." He clears his throat. "We dated for awhile."

"Wait," my dad says. "You're not saying—"

"Yes," my mom says, her eyes narrowed on Curt. "But I want Curt to tell him since it seems he's been hiding this from him."

"Tell me what?" I ask, my heart thumping harder.

Curt pauses. "That I'm your father."

"You're *what*?" I step back, not believing it's true. Not wanting to.

"Curt Hensley is the boy who got me pregnant," my mom says, glaring at him. "And then took off, without any explanation."

I stare at Curt, at his face, suddenly seeing the resemblance. The color of his eyes. The shape of his nose. The thick dark hair. He's an older version of me. I never noticed it before. Why would I? I never in a million years would've thought he was my father.

"I trusted you," I say, my anger building as my shock turns to rage. I step

closer to him. “I confided in you. All those questions you asked about my personal life? I thought you were just being nice, a coach who actually cared about his team. But this whole time, you were trying to get information about me. You lied to me. You’ve been lying to me this whole time!” I lunge at him, but my dad grabs me and pulls me back.

“Theo, stop!” my dad yells.

“I was trying to get to know you,” Curt says to me, “before I told you who I was. Maybe that was wrong, but—”

“I’m going to fucking kill you, you bastard!” I raise my fist as my dad struggles to keep hold of me.

“Theo, calm down,” my dad says. “Hitting him isn’t going to fix anything.”

“That fucker deserves to be hit for what he did to Mom.”

“And to his son,” my mom says, her eyes still on Curt. “How could you just show up here like this? And not even tell him who you are?”

“I was going to,” Curt says. “I just needed more time. I didn’t think he’d talk to me if I told him who I was. Sherry, if you’d agreed to let me see him, I would’ve—”

“Don’t you dare blame this on me!” she yells. “For 21 years you were out of his life. You never even called to see how he was. And then you call me out of the blue, asking to see him?” She huffs. “It’s too damn late.”

“He called you?” my dad asks my mom.

“At Thanksgiving,” she says. “I told him I’d call the police if he got anywhere near Theo.”

“It isn’t a crime to see my son,” Curt says.

“I never wanted to see you,” I say, glaring at him. “I was hoping you were dead.”

“Theo,” my dad says, grabbing me and pulling me back. “Let’s go back to your house so you can calm down.” He looks at my mom. “Sherry, take Ella and go to the car.”

Keeping her eyes on Curt, my mom steps back to Ella and puts her arm around her, then turns and walks toward the car, which is parked down the street.

When they’re out of earshot, my dad steps up to Curt. “You stay the hell away from my son. And don’t you ever fucking call my wife again, or talk to her, or make any attempt to see her. You have no idea the damage you have done to her and our family. I will not let you come back into our lives and

cause even more damage.” He backs away. “Theo, let’s go.”

I take one last look at Curt before turning away and walking beside my dad down the street.

“Theo, I’m sorry,” Curt yells. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Keep walking,” my dad says, speeding up his pace.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I say.

“I never thought it would. I honestly thought he’d never come back.”

We get to the car and drive back to my house, none of us saying anything until my dad pulls into the driveway.

“Does this mean we’re not going to the city?” Ella asks.

“I’m sorry, honey,” my dad says. “We’ll have to go another time.”

I get out of the car and storm to the house. I fling open the door, yank off my coat, and toss it on the floor.

“How was lunch?” Darcy asks. I didn’t even notice her sitting on the couch.

“Great, until my deadbeat dad showed up.”

“You’re what?” She jumps up from the couch as my family walks in. She looks at them, then back at me. “What happened?”

“You know Coach Hensley?” I say.

“Yeah. What about him?”

“Turns out he’s the guy who took off after I was born.” I go to the kitchen to grab a beer, then realize I shouldn’t do that with my mom here. It’ll make her want to drink and a drunk mom is the last thing I need right now.

“Wait—Coach Hensley is your dad?” Darcy asks. “And he never told you?”

“He probably never would’ve if he hadn’t seen my mom.”

Darcy looks at my mom, then back at me. “I’ll get out of here. Let you guys talk.” She hurries to the stairs and up to her room.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell my family. I go upstairs to Darcy’s room. “Hey.” I knock on her door.

She opens it. “I’ll grab a book and go somewhere to read.”

“Darcy, you don’t have to leave. I don’t even know how long my family is staying. This just happened. We’re all still in shock.”

Darcy comes out of her room and hugs me. “I’m sorry, Theo. I can’t believe he just showed up like that and didn’t tell you.”

“I can’t either. I hated him before, but I hate him even more now.” I keep hold of her, realizing how much I’ve missed this—our friendship and

whatever else we had. We never really defined it, but I want it back. We live in the same house, but I miss her.

She lets me go. “Are you sure you don’t want me to leave? Because I don’t mind. I don’t want to get in the way.”

“You’re not in the way. And I don’t want you to leave. I’ll feel better having you here.”

She smiles a little. “Really?”

“Darcy, I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep living this way, like we’re strangers living in the same house.”

“I know.” She looks down. “I hate it.”

“Then stop. Stop treating me like a landlord and let’s go back to being friends. I could really use one right now.”

She hugs me again.

“Is that a yes?” I ask.

She steps back, wiping her eyes. “Yes.”

“Okay, well, I’d rather stay up here with you, but I have to go deal with this.”

She nods. “Yeah, go.”

Back downstairs, I find Ella sitting on the couch and my parents by the kitchen, whispering to each other.

“What’s going on?” I ask, going over to my parents.

“We’re considering calling the police about Curt,” my dad says. “And maybe getting a restraining order against him.”

“Why? Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“No, but we don’t want him coming near you again.”

“What about football? I’m not quitting the team because of him.”

“Your mother and I are going to contact the athletic director and tell him what happened and how a man like that shouldn’t be allowed to work here.”

“They’re not going to fire him for this,” I say. “It’s a personal matter. It has nothing to do with his job.”

“They at least need to know what he did. If they choose to keep him on staff, we’ll have to decide what to do next. Perhaps you’ll need to transfer to a different school.”

“I’m not leaving. I have friends here. And I like the school. Why should I be forced to leave?”

“Honey, you can’t stay,” my mom says. “Not if Curt does. You won’t be able to avoid him.”

“I’ll just pretend he’s someone else. I’m not going to treat him like he’s my father just because he showed up here.”

“Theo, it doesn’t work that way,” my dad says. “Knowing who he is, you can’t go back to seeing him like you did before.”

“And I don’t want you around him,” my mom says. “He doesn’t deserve to have you in his life after ignoring you the past 21 years.”

I don’t know what to do. My thoughts are all over the place. I’m still trying to process this. I can’t make decisions right now. And I’m worried about my mom. I’m worried what seeing Curt again will do to her.

“Can I talk to you?” I say to my mom. “Alone? We can go to my room.”

She nods and we go upstairs. We go into my room and I shut the door.

“Mom, I’m worried about you.”

“Me? I’m worried about *you*. You just found out Curt’s your father. He deceived you.”

“But I don’t have a history with him. To me, he’s a stranger. To you, he’s... a guy you loved. Had a kid with.”

She turns away. “Yes, well, that’s over now. I’ve moved on.”

“Have you?” I come in front of her. “You started drinking after he left. And you haven’t stopped.”

“Theo, don’t start with this. We’re here to talk about Curt, not how many glasses of wine I have with dinner.”

“It’s more than wine. And it’s not just at dinner. And it’s gotten worse since he called you at Thanksgiving.”

She walks away, then turns back. “Your first love is hard to get over. You’ll find that out when it happens to you. So yes, when Curt left, I was devastated, but more so for you than for me. You never got to know your father. For awhile I held out hope that he’d come back, but part of me knew he was gone for good. I was young and didn’t know how to handle that kind of loss. Then my parents died and the loss became even harder.” She walks up to me. “I admit I didn’t handle it well and that I used drinking to help me get through it. But Theo, lecturing me about it isn’t going to change anything. I’m doing the best I can and I need you to understand that.”

“What I understand is that your drinking is related to him. And that seeing him again is going to make things worse. I’m worried you’ll go back home and spend all your time in your room, drinking until—”

“Theo, that’s enough! I am not discussing this with you. I’m a grown woman and I’m not going to have my son telling me how to live my life.”

“Mom, I have to know if me staying here, with him at my school, is going to make things worse for you. How can I make a decision if I don’t know that?”

She grips my arm. “This is your decision, Theo. You’re a grown man, and as much as I don’t want Curt near you, if you decide to stay at Halston, with him as your coach, I’ll have to accept that. I know how much you love it here and love being on the team. I’m not going to take that away from you.”

I shake my head. “This isn’t fair. I shouldn’t have to make this decision. He never should’ve come here. What did he say when he called you at Thanksgiving?”

She goes over to my bed and sits down. “He said he was sorry for leaving and that he knew he was wrong. He tried to explain why he left, but I wouldn’t let him. I didn’t want to hear it. Whatever explanation he had doesn’t matter now. What matters is that he left and never came back.”

“Did he ask about me?”

She nods. “He asked where you were, where he could find you.”

“So he didn’t know I was here? At Halston?”

“He must not have.”

I pause to think about that. What are the odds he ends up getting a job at my college? Is it really a coincidence?

“If he was telling the truth,” I say. “If he really didn’t know I went to Halston, then he came here for the job, not for me.”

“I suppose that’s possible, but when he saw you here, and realized who you were, he should’ve told you.”

“Did he know my name?”

“Not your first name, but I’m sure he assumed your last was Jenkins, like mine.”

“He would’ve seen the team roster. He would’ve seen my name, but he couldn’t have thought it was me until he saw me. Until he saw how similar we look.”

“You do look like him,” my mom says.

“Now I get why he asked me so many questions. About you, and my childhood and where I grew up. He kept saying he just wanted to get to know his players, but that was a lie. He was asking me that stuff to get information about me after he found out I’m his son.”

“There has to be something the school could do. It’s not right for Curt to have deceived you like that. I’m sure if I talked to the school and explained

our concerns, they'd at least consider letting him go."

"I need to think about this before we do anything."

"Theo, you'll have to keep seeing him if he's your coach. At least if we file a complaint, he might be put on probation and told to stay home."

"It's not football season. I don't see him that much. I see him at the gym, but I could go there late at night when he's not working."

"Would you like some time to think this over? I could wait downstairs."

"I need more than a few minutes to think about this. I might need a few days."

"I'll go tell your father we'll be staying. I'll have him look for a hotel."

"No. You don't need to stay. It's better if you don't. I don't want you running into Curt."

"Honey, we can't just leave. We need to be here to support you, to help you through this."

"I have support. I have friends here. And Darcy."

My mom smiles. "She seems like a very nice girl."

"She is. We got to be really close over winter break." I notice my mom's brows rise. "Not that kind of close. I mean we got to be close friends."

There's a knock on the door. "Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, Dad. You can come in."

He opens the door and walks over to us. "I found the number for the athletic director, but I'm guessing he won't be answering his calls until Monday."

"Theo would like us to wait," my mom says. "He wants some time to think about it."

My dad looks at me. "You don't want to report this? The man deceived you. He came here with the intent of getting to know you without your permission."

"We don't think he knew Theo was here when he took the job," my mom says.

"I don't believe that for one second," my dad scoffs.

"Dad, can we just wait? I don't want to do anything yet. I need some time to think. My head's a fucking mess right now."

"If that's what you want," he says, reluctantly, "then yes, we'll wait."

I don't know what I want. That's the problem. I was ready to report Curt and try to get him fired, but finding out he didn't intentionally come here because of me made me second guess that decision. It was still wrong of him

not to tell me who he was, so maybe he deserves to be fired just for that.

I wish I hadn't gotten to know him, because I really liked him until today. Everyone on the team likes him too. He seemed like a great guy and a really good coach. How does a guy like that leave his family? How does he go all those years without even checking on his son and the woman he claimed to love?

CHAPTER TWENTY

THEO

MY PARENTS LEFT AFTER DINNER. They wanted to get a hotel room for the night, but I told them to go home. As much as I love my family, it wasn't helping to have them here. They kept trying to get me to talk, but I had nothing to say. I can't talk to my parents about this. There's too much emotion around it. Curt's never been physically in our lives, but he's been there in other ways. He's the reason my mom drinks, which causes tension between her and my dad and takes her away from Ella and me. Because of that, my parents want him out of my life. I think I do too, but part of me isn't sure, which my parents don't understand. I don't understand it either, which is why I need time to figure it out.

"Theo?" Darcy knocks on my door.

"Come in."

She opens the door and sees me lying on the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused. Angry. Exhausted."

"Is there anything I can do?" She walks over to the bed and sits down beside me.

"I don't know. I can't think right now."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No. I want you to—" I stop, knowing it's a bad idea. "Never mind. Forget it."

"Theo, just say it. What can I do?"

"I was going to ask you to lie here with me, but I don't want you thinking I'm trying to, you know, do something else."

"Move over."

"Darcy, you don't—"

“Just move over.”

When I do, she lays down next to me, turning on her side, her back to me. She reaches for my arm and pulls it around her waist.

“Is this good?”

I pull her closer, until her back is against my chest. “It’s perfect.”

Closing my eyes, I inhale her soft, flowery scent and feel the warmth of her body against mine. My muscles relax for the first time since finding out the news about Curt.

“This feels good,” I say. “I’m finally starting to relax.”

“Wes called. He wanted to know how you’re doing.”

He called earlier, but I didn’t answer because my family was here. I told Darcy to tell him what happened. I’m sure by now he’s told some of the guys on the team. I considered keeping it a secret, but I didn’t know how to keep a secret that big. The guys would notice me acting differently around Curt, or if I skipped team meetings to avoid him, they’d want to know why.

“What’d you tell him?” I ask.

“That you’re doing okay but still in shock about Curt.”

“I think I’ll be feeling that way for awhile.”

“He said he’ll try calling tomorrow,” Darcy says, “but if you don’t want to talk, he understands.”

“Did he tell the guys?”

“Not yet. I think he’s going to wait. They’re all at the party getting drunk. It’s not really the time.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” I pause. “Hey, thanks for having dinner with my family. It helped to have you there.”

“I like your family. They seem like nice people.”

“They liked you too. And of course they assumed we were dating, like everyone does.”

“Even strangers think we are. The check-out girl at the grocery store last week asked me where my boyfriend was, meaning you.”

Maybe it’s because I’m not thinking straight right now, but I really want to do this. I want to tell Darcy I want a relationship with her, even knowing what could happen if it doesn’t work out. I’m tired of hiding how I feel.

“I want that,” I say.

“Want what?”

“I want us to date.”

She looks back at me. “Are you serious?”

“I know we had all these reasons why we shouldn’t, but I’m tired of worrying about that.”

“What about Erica?”

“What about her?”

“Aren’t you kind of seeing her?”

“No. I haven’t talked to her since that night she was here.”

Darcy turns away. “Don’t you mean the morning?”

“Morning?” I ask, confused.

“I saw her sweater on the couch. I know she spent the night.”

“She took the sweater off when she got here. She just forgot to get it when she left.”

“You’re saying nothing happened?”

“We kissed. But it felt wrong. And I kept thinking about you. Then you walked in and I felt even worse. After you took off, I told Erica to leave and not call me anymore. Darcy, I want to be with you, not Erica. I want to be able to say yes when people ask if you’re my girlfriend.”

She turns to me, a slight smile on her face. “You want me to be your girlfriend?”

“You’re not going to laugh at me, are you? Because that would be really mean.”

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m just confused. Calling me your girlfriend is serious. We haven’t even dated yet.”

“If you just want to date and don’t want me calling you my girlfriend, I guess that’s okay.”

“No, I want you to. I like it.”

“So we’re dating,” I say, confirming it.

“We’re dating.”

“Then I can finally do this.” I gently cup her face and kiss her.

She turns toward me as my tongue slips past her lips. Damn, she turns me on. One kiss and my cock’s already hard.

“I want you so bad,” I whisper over her mouth.

“Then take me,” she whispers back.

That’s all I needed to hear. I thought she’d say it was too soon, that we should date first, even though we’ve already done it. But I didn’t want to wait. She’s all I think about, the girl that consumes my thoughts, my dreams.

“Take it off.” I point to her t-shirt.

She slowly sits up, her eyes on mine, and pulls the shirt up over her head.

I take it from her and toss it on the floor.

“Now those.” I point to the tight little shorts she’s got on, the ones that get me hard every time she walks around in them.

“Why don’t you do it?” she asks, smiling a little.

“I said take them off.” I say it forcefully, knowing it turns her on. She likes a guy who takes charge in the bedroom. It’s another reason we’re good together. I love taking control, making her do as I ask.

She lays down, lifts her hips, and starts tugging down her shorts.

“Leave the panties,” I say.

She stops midway down her thighs, leaving the shorts and sliding her hot pink panties back up to where they were. “Like this?”

“Keep going.”

She gets the shorts off and drops them on the floor. “Now what?”

“Turn around.”

She turns so her back’s to me. I get up and undress, my gaze moving up and down her body, pausing on her tight, round ass that’s barely contained in her skimpy panties. I slide up behind her, my hand cupping her breast, my cock pressed against her ass.

She lets out a breath and starts to turn to me.

“No,” I say, tightening my hold on her.

She turns back on her side. I massage her breast and rub my thumb over her nipple. Her breaths speed up as I rub harder. Before I knew Darcy this way, I would’ve guessed she liked her lovemaking to be delicate and sweet, but I’m pleased to find out she likes it a little rough. That’s my style too, although I can also be gentle if she was in the mood for that.

My hand lowers, sliding under her panties. I shove them aside and plunge two fingers in her. She arches back, her ass pressing against my cock. I slide it up and down between her cheeks as my fingers move inside her.

“Theo,” she says, trying to turn toward me. She wants me inside her, and I will be soon, but not yet. I decide when, not her.

“Kiss me,” I tell her.

She turns back and presses her lips to mine. I slide my fingers out of her and rub her clit, soft at first, then harder.

She breaks from the kiss, her head falling back on the bed. She’s breathing fast, her hips moving with my hand.

“Hold still,” I say, “or I’ll stop.”

She does as I ask, struggling not to move as my touch gets harder,

rougher, faster.

“Oh God!” She grabs my arm as she comes, her body trembling.

I lay her on her back, then yank her panties down her legs. I grab a condom from the nightstand and quickly put it on. I push inside her and her hips jerk up, her body still sensitive from what I did to her.

“You feel so damn good,” I whisper in her ear. She’s so wet, I easily slide in and out of her.

I lower down more and her arms go around me, her fingers raking down my back.

“Wrap your legs around me,” I tell her.

When she does, I reach under her and grab her ass, holding it firmly in my hands as I thrust into her harder, so hard I lift her hips off the bed. I keep going, waiting for her to tell me it’s too much, to slow down or be gentler, but she doesn’t. She holds on tighter, her body moving with mine.

I’m about to come but want Darcy to go first. I pause a moment in an attempt to give her time, but can’t hold back. I start moving again.

“Yes,” Darcy moans. “Keep going.”

A few more thrusts and she’s there, coming just moments before I do. Sex with her is so damn good. She’s ruined me for anyone else.

I pull out of her and collapse back on the bed, catching my breath. Darcy turns and lays her head on my chest.

“Just a minute.” I get up and go to the bathroom to toss out the condom. When I return, she’s got the covers pulled over her. “You cold?” I ask, getting into bed with her.

“A little.”

I pull her beside me so her body’s against mine. Within minutes, we fall asleep. When I wake up, it’s after two and I hear people on the street yelling like they’re drunk. They’re probably getting back from a party. That would normally be me, stumbling home drunk on a Saturday night. But tonight I skipped the party to stay home, thinking I’d spend the night in my room, angry and confused about the situation with Curt. Instead, I ended up with Darcy in my bed, still not sure what to do about Curt, but feeling a lot better than I did earlier. Darcy always makes me feel better, without even trying. Just having her near me, listening to me and being here for me, makes me feel like things will be okay.

I look at her asleep in my arms, her head on my chest, and lean down to kiss her forehead.

“I hope this works out,” I whisper. “I don’t want to lose you.”
I kiss her again, then fall asleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up to my phone going off. I grab it from the nightstand. “Yeah?”

“Theo, it’s Wes. You home?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Avery and I were going to stop by with some breakfast. See how you’re doing.”

“Who is it?” Darcy asks, sitting up a little.

“It’s not a good time,” I tell Wes. “I just woke up.”

“Who was that talking?” he asks. “You got a girl in your bed?”

“No,” I say, not sure if Darcy and I are telling people the news yet. “Maybe you could stop by later, like around noon.”

“I’m going to the gym at noon. I’m guessing you aren’t going there today.”

“Not with him there.” I sit up, leaning against the headboard. “Maybe I’ll go to the campus gym.”

“You can’t avoid him. We have a team meeting tomorrow. He’ll be there.”

“So I’ll skip the meeting. What the hell do we need to meet for? We’re not playing games.”

“You’re part of the team. You have to show up. Are you going to talk to Coach Daley? Tell him what happened?”

“I haven’t decided. I need more time to think about it.”

“I’m going to take a shower,” Darcy says, getting out of bed.

“Okay, that was definitely a girl,” Wes says. “Is it Erica?”

“Hold on.” I drop the phone on the bed and go up to Darcy as she’s leaving my room. “Hey, what are we telling people about us?”

She turns to me. “We’re still dating, right?”

“Well, yeah, I just didn’t know if I could tell people.”

“I’m okay with it.”

“Then I’m telling Wes. He and Avery want to come over with breakfast. You good with that?”

“Yeah, but I want to be the one to tell Avery about us. I’m going to go call her.” She races down to her room.

I return to the bed and pick up the phone. “It was Darcy. The girl you heard.”

“She was in your room... or in your bed?”

“Both. We’re kind of dating now. Actually, not kind of. We *are* dating.”

“When did this happen?”

“Last night.”

“I don’t get it. How do you go from not talking to each other to dating? Did I miss something?”

“I don’t really know how it happened. She had dinner with my family and then after they left she came in my room to talk and we ended up in my bed.”

“So it was just sex. You’re not really dating.”

“No, we’re dating. I told her it’s what I wanted. I’m tired of worrying about what might happen if it doesn’t work out. She’s all I think about. When I even try to think of being with someone else, my head goes back to Darcy.”

“I knew you wanted her,” Wes says with a laugh. “I don’t know why you took so long to admit it.”

“Because I didn’t want to lose her as a friend, which could happen if we break up.”

“Does Avery know?”

“Not yet, and don’t tell her. Darcy wants to. She’s going to call her.”

I think she already did.

“Wes!” I hear Avery say in the background. “Darcy’s dating Theo!”

“Yeah, I heard,” he says to her.

“Hey, if you want to come over,” I say, “just give us a few minutes to get ready.”

“Okay, we’ll be over soon.”

We end the call and I go down to Darcy’s room.

“Darcy, you still on the phone?”

The door’s half open so I walk into her room. I hear the shower running and go into her bathroom.

“Wes and Avery are coming over in a few minutes,” I say.

“Theo!” Darcy peeks her head out from the shower curtain. “You can’t just walk in here when I’m in the shower.”

“Why not? The door was open.”

“I meant to close it.” Her gaze moves down my body. “Why are you

naked?”

“I like being naked. Clothes make me hot.”

“Theo, you can’t walk around naked.”

“Why not? We’re dating, and it’s not like you haven’t seen any of this before.”

“You still need to put clothes on,” she says, her gaze rising back to my face.

“Why?” I walk up to her. “Does it bother you?” I kiss her wet lips. “Seeing me naked?”

She just smiles, which I guess is her answer.

Shoving the curtain aside, I join her in the shower.

“Theo, what are you—”

I press my lips to hers and pull her body against mine.

“We don’t have time for this,” she says as I press my cock between her legs. “Wes and Avery are going to be here soon.”

I let out a sigh. “I should’ve told them to come over later.”

We finish the shower and are drying off when the doorbell rings.

“Shit, they’re here,” I say.

“Go get dressed,” Darcy says as the doorbell rings again. “I’ll text Avery that we’ll be there in a minute.”

I go to my room and throw on some jeans and a shirt, then race downstairs to the door

“Hey,” I say, smiling at Wes and Avery. “Come on in.”

“You look good,” Wes says, coming into the house with Avery. “I was thinking you’d look like shit after what you’ve been through.”

“But now he has a girlfriend,” Avery says, taking a box of pastries to the kitchen and setting them on the counter. “To make him feel better.”

“She definitely made me feel better,” I say, thinking about last night.

Wes laughs a little. “Did we interrupt something? You took long enough to answer the door.”

“Wes!” Avery says, walking over to him. “I told you not to say anything.”

“Why? It’s not a damn secret. You remember what it was like when we first started dating.”

“Actually, you did interrupt,” I say. “Your timing sucks.”

Wes just smiles.

“So where’s Darcy?” Avery asks.

“She’s in her room.”

“I’ll go talk to her.” Avery goes upstairs.

“So you and Darcy,” Wes says, sitting on the couch. “I figured it’d happen eventually.”

“I didn’t.” I sit down on the chair. “I thought she hated me for telling the guys she was off limits.”

“She obviously got over it.”

“I just hope it works out. I don’t want us breaking up and having her not talk to me anymore.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. She likes having you as a friend. She won’t want to give that up.”

“She might, depending on how things end between us.”

“Stop talking about things ending. You just started dating. You shouldn’t even be thinking about that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I need to be all in or this isn’t going to work. So how was the party last night?”

“Good.” Wes laughs. “Colton got really drunk and was dancing like a male stripper.”

“No shit? Did he actually strip?”

“He took his shirt off. After that I couldn’t see. A group of girls surrounded him and next time I looked, he was taking a couple of them back to his room.”

“Did you tell anyone about Curt?”

“I told Eli and Zane. They probably told some of the other guys. I’m sure by the end of the day, everyone will know.”

“What’d they say when you told them?”

“They asked how you’re doing. I didn’t want to speak for you so I just said you needed some time to figure things out.”

“What would you do if you were me?”

“Theo, I’m not going to tell you what to do. You need to decide for yourself.”

“I can’t decide. I keep going back and forth between wanting to know him and wanting to kill him for what he did to my mom.”

“What if you talked to him?”

“About what?”

“Why he left.”

“I already know why he left. He’s a fucking coward who couldn’t man up

and take care of his kid and marry the girl he claimed to love.”

“Maybe there’s more to it than that. Maybe something happened and he had to leave.”

“He joined the military. That was his decision. He wasn’t forced to. Why the hell are you sticking up for him?”

“I’m not. I’m just saying, it wouldn’t hurt to talk to him. Maybe it’d help you make a decision.”

“You guys ready to eat?” Avery asks, coming down the stairs with Darcy.

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Wes says, getting up from the couch.

Darcy smiles at me as she follows Avery to the kitchen. I smile back, already wanting her again. We’d be back in my bed if Wes and Avery hadn’t shown up. If it were up to me, we’d spend the whole day there. I’d rather do that than spend the day trying to figure out what to do about Curt.

The decision should be easy. Cut him out of my life. Never talk to him again. That should be my answer. So why am I making it so hard?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DARCY

“HEY, sorry I couldn’t meet for coffee,” I say, answering Avery’s call as I go into my room. “But I really needed that extra time to study for the quiz.”

“I understand. We’ll do it some other time. So how’s your boyfriend?”

I smile every time she calls him that. Theo’s been my boyfriend for three days now but it still doesn’t seem real. We denied our feelings for each other for so long, and spent so much time convincing ourselves that dating would be a horrible idea, that I really never thought it would happen.

Theo took me on a date Sunday night and again on Monday. It’s strange going on a date with him then coming home to a house we both live in. It’s like we skipped the dating stage and went straight to living together. I’ve slept in his bed every night since he asked me to be his girlfriend.

“He’s great,” I say, laying down on my bed. “We’re best friends. The sex is amazing. Things are almost too good. I’m worried it won’t last.”

“Don’t think that way. Just be happy it’s going so well and that you found a guy you really like.”

“I more than like him.”

“What are you saying? That you love Theo?”

“I think so.” I can’t believe I just admitted that. I wasn’t going to. I don’t know why I did.

“Darcy, that’s great!”

“Is it? Because it kind of makes me feel sick.”

“Why do you feel sick?”

“Because I know it’s going to hurt a lot when it ends.”

“Would you stop talking about it ending? Theo’s crazy about you. It’s not going to end.”

“My parents were in love and it ended. What if that happens to Theo and me?”

“You don’t know what happened between your parents. You only know what they told you, which isn’t much. You can’t compare their relationship to the one you have with Theo.”

“My parents sold the house. My mom texted me this morning to tell me.”

“How do you feel about it being sold?”

“Relieved. I just want it to be over. Their divorce. The house being sold. I’m tired of thinking about it.”

“When are you going back there?”

“I don’t know. But when I go, I’m hoping Theo will go with me. I think it’d help to have him there.”

“I’m sure he’d go with you. And then he could meet your parents.”

“Do you think it’s too soon for that? For Theo to meet my parents?”

“I don’t think so. You already met his.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Has he said anything about his dad? I mean, Curt?”

“He said he doesn’t want to see him, but I don’t know how he can avoid him. He can’t keep skipping training and team meetings.”

“Yeah, Wes said Theo needs to tell Coach Daley what’s going on or he’s going to get suspended from the team.”

“I’m surprised Curt hasn’t fessed up and told his bosses what he did. They’re going to find out eventually.”

“Has Theo talked to his mom?”

“They talked last night. He said she sounded okay, meaning she wasn’t drunk. She wants him to come home this weekend, but he’s not going. He wants us to go to the city for the weekend to get away from all the Curt stuff, but I’m trying to talk him out of it.”

“Why? Maybe it’d be good to get away.”

“He needs to deal with this, not run from it. It’s like me with my parents. I keep thinking they’ll get back together, but I have to accept that’s it over between them.” I notice another call coming in. “Speaking of that, my mom’s calling.”

“Go ahead and answer. I’ll talk to you later.”

I switch to the other call. “Hey, Mom. Are you at work?”

“I took the afternoon off. I’m meeting your father to sign the paperwork to sell the house. It’s wonderful how quickly it sold.”

She's happy it sold while I'm tearing up. How could she not be even a little sad about selling it? It's the house where she raised me, her only child. All our family memories are there.

"How's everything with Theo?" my mom asks.

"Good."

I texted her that Theo and I are dating, but didn't tell her what's going on with him and I don't want to get into it now. I'd rather find out why she's calling. She usually doesn't call without a reason.

"I'd love to meet him sometime," my mom says. "Maybe this weekend."

"This weekend? You're coming here?"

"I was thinking about it. That's why I'm calling. I'll be close to there and thought if you're available, maybe we could stop by and see you."

"You and Dad?" I sit up. "You guys are back together?"

"Oh, no, honey. I meant Graham and me. We're taking a little trip this weekend."

"Graham? Who's Graham?"

"Dr. Silver. The cardiologist. You've met him. He's been to our house several times."

"The old guy? With gray hair?"

She laughs a little. "He's 52. He's not that old."

"What are you saying? That you're dating him?"

"We're exploring the idea."

"What about Ashton? The guy you were dating at Christmas?"

"That wasn't anything serious. We only went out a few times."

"And you're already dating this new guy?"

"We've been friends for years and just recently decided we might want to be more than that."

"How can you date all these guys when just a month ago you were still with Dad?"

She sighs. "Darcy, my relationship with your father ended over a year ago. Actually, longer than that. We just didn't address it until last summer, when we started talking about a divorce." She pauses. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this but—"

"Dad has someone too," I say, finishing her thought.

"Yes. Nina. You might remember her. She babysat you a few times."

"THAT Nina? She's like 20 years younger than him."

"Fifteen, and she's now a surgical nurse at the hospital. That's how they

reconnected. She's on his surgical team."

My mom's got a new boyfriend and my dad's dating the girl who used to babysit me? I feel sick, like the world's spinning out of control and I need to make it stop.

"Mom, I need to go," I say.

"What about this weekend?"

"I can't. I'm busy. I'll talk to you later." I end the call and toss the phone on my bed. I hear noise downstairs and race down there to find Theo in the kitchen.

"Hey." He smiles at me and I instantly feel my sick stomach starting to feel better. "I didn't know you were home."

I go up to him and hug him.

"What's going on?" He laughs a little. "You just missed me or what?" When I don't answer, he pulls back a little and looks at me with concern. "Hey, what's going on?"

"My mom just called." I pause. "She has a boyfriend. And not the guy I met at Christmas, but some new guy. And my dad is dating a woman who used to babysit me. She's 15 years younger than him."

"Your mom just told you this?"

"Yeah. She acted like it wasn't a big deal, like I shouldn't be upset."

"She doesn't get it. She's moved on without considering that you're still trying to accept the divorce."

"Yeah, exactly." I knew Theo would understand. It's why we're best friends. He always gets how I'm feeling and knows the right thing to say. "Part of me was hoping they'd get back together, which is stupid because they barely talked to each other at Christmas."

"It's not stupid. It's normal to hope for stuff that you know will never happen. I did that for years until I finally accepted he was never coming back."

I look up at Theo. "You thought your dad would come back?"

"I knew he wouldn't, but that didn't stop me from hoping he would."

"For how long? How old were you when you decided he'd never come back?"

"Eight or nine." Theo opens the fridge and takes out a sports drink. "Don't tell my mom this. She thinks I never thought about him, which is what I told her so she wouldn't feel even worse about him leaving." He opens the bottle and takes a drink.

“Don’t you have class right now?” I ask, noticing the time.

“I skipped it. I didn’t feel like going.” He opens the cupboard and takes out a bag of chips.

“Theo, you can’t miss class. It’s the first week.”

“Which is when nothing happens. I can miss class and it won’t make a difference.”

“Did you go to the gym?” I ask, noticing he’s wearing his workout clothes.

“I went to the student gym, not the football one.” He tears open the chip bag and sets it on the counter. “Want one?”

I step in front of him. “Theo, you can’t keep missing class. You’ve missed three this week. You’re going to fall behind.”

He shrugs. “Yeah? So? I’ll catch up later.” He reaches behind me and grabs the bag of chips. “You want to go to a movie tonight?”

“I can’t. I have to study. And so do you.”

“C’mon, it’s only for a few hours. You can study later.”

“Theo, we need to talk about this.”

“About what?” He gulps down his drink.

“You. Not going to class. Not training with the team. Not dealing with your dad.”

“He’s not my fucking dad.” Theo throws the chip bag on the counter, sending chips flying across it. “And I don’t want to talk about it. I’m going upstairs.”

The doorbell rings.

“That’s Colton,” Theo says. “He’s dropping off my jacket. I left it in his car.”

He walks to the door as it rings again.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I hear Theo say.

“Just give me five minutes,” a man says. “Let me explain.”

I walk up behind Theo and see Curt at the door.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Theo says. “There’s nothing you could say that would make what you did okay. Now get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m not leaving until I talk to you. This needs to end, Theo. You can’t avoid me forever. You need to get back to training. Coach Daley’s already talking about suspending you from the team.”

“Let him. I don’t give a shit.”

“Theo, you don’t mean that,” I say to him.

“Stay out of this,” he says in an angry tone he’s never used with me.

I take a step back.

“She cares about you,” Curt says. “She sees you’re only hurting yourself by doing this.”

“Doing what? Avoiding you? You’re saying it’d hurt less for me to go to the gym and see the asshole who abandoned me and turned my mom into an alcoholic?”

“Theo, you can’t blame me for that.”

“Are you kidding me? She didn’t drink until after you left, which you’d know if you’d come back to check on us.”

“Your mother drank in high school. We both did.”

“Yeah? So did I, and I don’t have a drinking problem. It was you that made her that way. You left her with nothing, not even a goodbye note.”

“Theo, you don’t understand. I was—”

“I don’t need to understand. I need you to get the fuck away from me.” Theo tries to shut the door, but Curt holds it open.

“If you just give me five minutes. That’s all I need.”

“You had 21 years to talk to me and you didn’t. It’s too fucking late now.” Theo gets out his phone and holds it up. “Leave or I call the police.”

Curt takes a step back.

Theo slams the door shut and locks it. “Fuck him.” He storms past me. “He thinks I want to listen to him list off excuses for why he left? I don’t want to hear it. I fucking hate him.”

“I’ll be in my room,” I quietly say as I make my way to the stairs.

“Darcy, wait.” Theo comes up to me. “I’m sorry for yelling at you like that. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You were upset. I understand.”

“I still shouldn’t have done it.” He pulls me into his arms. “I lost it. I saw Curt at the door and lost it.”

“He shouldn’t have shown up like that. He should’ve asked before coming over.”

“He knew I’d tell him he couldn’t. That’s why he just showed up here.” Theo lets me go and walks over to the couch to sit down. “He doesn’t care that I don’t want to see him. He only cares about himself and what he wants.”

I walk over to him. “Are you even a little curious to hear his explanation?”

“No. Whatever he says isn’t going to be a good enough reason to leave

his kid and the woman he loves.” He grabs the remote and turns on the TV. “I don’t trust that asshole. I just want him to leave and never come back.”

“Is that your decision?” I sit next to Theo. “Have you decided you want nothing to do with him?”

Theo shrugs. “Why would I want him around? I have nothing to say to him and being around him just pisses me off.”

“Are you going to talk to Coach Daley? Tell him the truth about Curt?”

“I’m guessing he already knows.”

“If he did, he wouldn’t be threatening to suspend you from the team. Maybe you should talk to him. You don’t want to be off the team because of this. You love football.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He looks at me. “I don’t want to talk about this. Can you just drop it?”

I nod. “Okay.”

He puts his arm around me and I slide up beside him. We watch a movie, but my mind keeps going to Curt, trying to find a way to fix this so Theo will go back to class and back to training. I care about him too much to let him mess up his life and his future. I just don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to help him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THEO

“FINALLY DECIDED TO SHOW UP?” Coach Daley says as I go into his office.

“I only missed a few days.” I sit down across from him. “And I still worked out. I just went to the student gym instead of here.”

Coach leans back in his chair, his arms resting over his stomach, his hands laced together. “What’s going on with you, Jenkins? You drinking too much? Got problems with a girl?”

“It’s not that.” I pause. “It’s Coach Hensley.”

“What about him?”

“Has he said anything to you? About me?”

“Just that you hadn’t been showing up to work out with the team.” His brows rise. “Is there a problem between you and Coach Hensley?”

“You could say that.” I straighten up in my chair.

“What exactly is going on?”

“My dad, the one you’ve met, is my stepdad. He raised me, but he’s not my biological dad.”

“And?” he says, like he wants me to hurry up and get to the point.

“My real dad took off before I was born. My mom and I never heard from him again.” I pause. “Until he showed up here a few weeks ago.”

“Hurry this up, Jenkins. I got things to do.”

“Curt—Coach Hensley—is the guy I’m talking about. The one who took off. My biological dad.”

“You sure about this? He told you he was your father?”

“He didn’t tell me. My mom did. She was here last weekend and saw him. That’s when I found out. The guy lied to me. He spent weeks getting to

know me and never told me who he was.”

“I see.” Coach Daley nods. “And that’s why you haven’t been in the gym?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to see him. I want him gone. I can’t be on the team if he’s the coach.”

“Theo, I’m not firing Coach Hensley, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Why the hell not? The guy lied. He pretended to be someone he wasn’t. Why would you want a guy like that working here?”

“He was hired to coach football. Whatever’s going on in his personal life is none of my business.”

“That’s bullshit!” I get up. “The guy’s a fucking liar! He got me to trust him and tell him stuff without telling me who he was!”

“Did he apply for the job because he knew you were on the team?”

“No, but what does that matter? When he found out, he should’ve turned down the job. Gone somewhere else. Are you telling me you’re not going to do anything? That he gets to keep his job?”

“As I said before, this is a personal matter. The school doesn’t get involved in the personal lives of its employees. If this were a criminal matter, we’d reconsider, but I don’t think not telling you something is a crime.”

“Then I’ll have him arrested if that’s what it takes to get rid of him. My parents have already talked about pressing charges against him. And they want to talk to the athletic director to make sure he doesn’t keep his job.”

“I doubt the police would charge him with anything, but if your parents want to pursue it, that’s up to them. As for the athletic director, he’s very fond of Coach Hensley. And it’s difficult to find a coach willing to work at a small school like this and live in a small town. If Coach Hensley leaves, it’ll be hard to find a replacement.”

“So that’s it? He gets to stay and I have to go?”

“Why don’t you two sit down and talk? Work this out.”

“There’s nothing to work out. The guy destroyed my mom’s life. And mine. And now he shows up out of nowhere and wants to be a dad? And my coach? Fuck that.” I fold my arms over my chest. “It’s him or me. What’s it going to be?”

“You’re being ridiculous. Go home and calm down. And tomorrow I want you at the gym with everyone else.”

“I asked you to choose. It’s him or me.”

He stands up. “I told you how hard it is to find a coach. I’ve got plenty of

players.”

“That’s your answer? You’re choosing Coach Hensley?”

He walks to the door and opens it. “Go home, Jenkins. I’ve got things to do.”

I storm out of his office and down the hall. As I go out to the parking lot, I see Wes coming towards me.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asks.

“I’m off the fucking team.”

“Wait, what?” He follows me to my car. “Coach kicked you off the team?”

“No. I quit.” I turn to Wes. “I just told Coach about Curt and he didn’t fucking care. He said it’s a personal matter and that he doesn’t get involved in that shit.”

“So you quit the team?”

“I told him it’s Curt or me and the asshole chose Curt. So I’m done.” I open the car door and get in.

“Theo, hold on. Let’s go somewhere and talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I can’t be on the team if he’s my coach. The guy lied to me. He used me to get information. I can’t trust him. I don’t want to even be around him.”

“There’s got to be a way to work this out. You shouldn’t have to quit the team.”

“I’ll see ya later, Wes.” I shut the door and drive off.

When I get home, Darcy’s on the couch, studying.

“Hey,” I say, going past her to the stairs. “I’ll be in my room.”

“Theo, what’s wrong?” She follows me upstairs.

“This isn’t a good time.” I stop outside my room. “I’m in a really bad mood.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I can’t talk about it. I need to calm down.”

She nods. “I’ll be downstairs.” She walks away.

“Darcy, wait.”

She turns back. “Yeah?”

“I changed my mind. I didn’t think I wanted to talk, but if I was going to talk to anyone, it’d be you.”

She walks back to me. “So what happened?”

We go into my room and I tell her the story. She’s as shocked as I am that

Coach Daley didn't think Curt should be fired. But as I talk about it, what Coach Daley said starts to make sense. What Curt did is a personal matter so the school will want to stay out of it. And they don't want to spend time and money finding a new assistant coach. It's easier to replace me than him.

"Are you really quitting the team?" Darcy asks.

"I don't have a choice. I hate the guy and don't respect him, so how can I be on his team?"

"Do you think he'd leave if you asked him to?"

"No. He doesn't think he did anything wrong. You saw how he acted when he showed up here yesterday, like I was the bad guy for telling him to leave."

"What if you just heard what he had to say?"

"Why? So he can feel better about what he did? I'm not letting him off the hook like that. What he did was wrong. I don't care what he says."

"You're not letting him off the hook. You're just asking why he left. Doesn't a small part of you want to know?"

"He left because he didn't want to take care of my mom and me. He wanted to go off and do his own thing."

"He was only 18. People don't make good decisions at that age."

"Yeah, and he had 21 years to change his mind and come back, but he didn't. Why are you taking his side on this?"

"I'm not. I'm just trying to find a way for you to stay on the team."

"It's just football. It's not my whole life."

"But football's a big part of your life. The team's like your family."

"I'll still be friends with the guys, even if I'm not on the team. Even if I leave school, I'll still—" I stop, realizing what I said. It was just a thought. I hadn't really considered it yet.

"Leave?" Darcy backs away from me. "You're thinking of dropping out of college?"

"It was just an idea. I didn't say I was going to do it."

"We just started dating and now you're thinking of leaving?" She gets up and races out of my room.

"Darcy, wait!" I follow her to her room, but she shuts the door in my face. I try the door but it's locked. "Darcy, open the door."

"Go away. I don't want to talk to you."

I sigh. "I never said I was leaving. Would you please open the door?"

She opens it just enough for me to see her face. "I knew this would

happen. I knew it was too good to last.”

“Darcy, you’re overreacting. I didn’t mean it. Can we just forget I said it?”

“If you said it, it means you’re thinking about it. And you haven’t been to class all week, which makes sense now that you’re dropping out.”

“I’m not dropping out. I didn’t go to class because I can’t focus on school when I’m trying to figure out what to do about Curt.”

“Sounds like you figured it out. Can you at least put the lease for the house in my name so I’m not homeless after you go?”

“For the last time, I’m not leaving.”

“But you’re considering it.”

I don’t answer. I don’t want to lie and tell her I’m not considering it. I feel like I have to at least make it an option. I don’t want to leave school, but I also don’t want to stay here and run into Curt on campus and around town.

“That’s what I thought,” Darcy says, slamming the door in my face.

She needs time to cool off, and I need time to figure out what the hell I’m doing. As I’m going downstairs, Wes calls.

“I thought you were at the gym,” I say, answering the call.

“I left. I was worried about you. I’m pulling up in your driveway.”

“Not now. I don’t feel like talking.”

“Then we’ll go get something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’re always hungry. Now get your ass out here or I’ll go in there and drag you out of there myself.”

I go outside and see his SUV in the driveway, the engine running.

I get in and slam the door shut. “I don’t know how Avery puts up with you.”

“She loves me.” He smiles at me. “So do you. She’s just better at showing me than you are.”

“Yeah, I would hope so,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“It’s rib night at Clancy’s. You in?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He glances at me but doesn’t say anything. He’s quiet for the rest of the drive. We get to the restaurant and sit at a table near the back. The waitress stops by and Wes orders us both the ribs.

“I said I wasn’t hungry,” I say as the waitress leaves.

Wes leans back in his chair. “What the hell’s going on with you?”

“I told you, I quit the team.”

“You can’t quit the team. You’re one of our best players.”

“I can’t be on the team with Curt as the coach.”

“So that’s it? You’re giving up something you love because of some guy you claim to hate? You’re giving him a lot of power. Is that really what you want?”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about this. If that’s why you brought me here, I’m leaving.”

He looks away, like he’s frustrated with me. But he doesn’t know what it’s like to have the guy who took off before you were born show up out of nowhere, pretend to be someone else to gain your trust, and then act like he didn’t do anything wrong when you find out the truth about him.

“Hey, look who’s here,” Colton says to Eli as they come over to our table.

“Did you set this up?” I say to Wes.

“No. I thought they were at the gym.”

“We were,” Eli says, sitting beside me, “but then Colton remembered it’s rib night.”

Colton sits on the other side of me. “We stopped by your house.”

“When?” I ask.

“Just now.” He waves down the waitress and she stops at our table. “Can you add two more?”

“The rib special?”

“Yeah, thanks.” He smiles at her.

She smiles back. “Colton, right?”

“Yeah. Have we met?”

“A few months ago. Zane’s party?”

“Oh, shit, yeah. Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“I’ll go put your order in.” She takes off.

“Did you sleep with her?” Wes asks Colton.

“Yeah. I didn’t recognize her. She looks different. I think she colored her hair. What’s her name? Did she tell you?”

“You slept with her and don’t know her damn name?” Wes asks.

“Hey, it was a long time ago. Like you remember the name of every girl you slept with?”

“I would if I saw her.”

Colton laughs. “Yeah, right.”

“So what did you want?” I say to Colton. “Why’d you go to my house?”

“To see if you wanted to come with us. We didn’t know you were already here.”

“Did you talk to Darcy?”

“Yeah, but not long. She seemed upset, like she’d been crying.”

“Why would she be crying?” Wes asks, eyeing me across the table.

“It’s probably because of her parents,” I say, not looking at him. “She’s upset about the divorce.”

“You sure that’s all it is?” Wes asks, in a tone that implies I’m lying to him.

The waitress returns with four platters of ribs. “Hope you guys are hungry.”

“Thanks, um... what was your name?” Eli asks, smiling at her.

“Eliza.” She smiles back at him. “You look familiar. Do I know you?”

“Eli. I’m on the team with Colton.”

“Hey, can I get some barbecue sauce?” I ask the waitress.

“Sure, I’ll be right back.” She takes off.

“What the hell, man?” Eli says to Colton. “Her name’s Eliza. It’s like mine, but with two extra letters. How could you not remember that?”

He shrugs. “I was drunk. I don’t remember shit when I’m drunk.”

“Did Darcy say anything?” Wes asks Colton. “When you went over there?”

“She just said Theo wasn’t home and that she didn’t know where he was.” Colton looks over at me. “She seemed pissed at you. What happened? You guys have a fight?”

“We’re not fighting,” I say, eating a rib so he’ll stop asking me questions.

“What’d you do?” Wes asks, looking at me across the table.

“Why do you assume it was me?” I grab another rib and start gnawing on it. “Maybe it was her.”

“I’m guessing it was you,” Colton says, smiling as he grabs a napkin from the dispenser.

“Here’s your sauce,” the waitress says, setting the bottle on the table.

“Thanks, Eliza,” Eli says, smiling at her.

“Sure. Let me know if you need anything else.” She walks off.

“See?” Eli says to Colton. “It’s not that damn hard to remember a name.”

Colton rolls his eyes.

Eli looks over at me. “You’ve been dating Darcy for what... a few days? And it’s already over? I thought you guys would at least make it a month.”

“Nothing’s over,” I say. “And we’re not fighting.”

“Just tell me what the fuck you did,” Wes says. “I’m going to find out anyway when I get home. I’m sure Darcy’s called Avery by now.”

The three of them stare at me, waiting for an answer.

“You guys are really shitty friends,” I say. “You won’t even consider taking my side on this?”

They don’t say anything.

“Okay, yeah, she’s mad at me, but it’s not my fault. It was a misunderstanding.”

“About what?” Wes asks.

I sigh. “I might’ve told her I was leaving.”

“Leaving what?” Eli asks.

“School. This town. To get away from Curt.”

“What the fuck?” Colton says. “You’re seriously leaving?”

“I’m just thinking about it. I haven’t made a decision yet.”

“Why would you even consider that?” Wes says. “You’re letting a guy who you claim ruined your life do it all over again. And you’re the one letting him do it.”

“I said I hadn’t made a decision,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Just let it go.”

“He told Coach he quit the team,” Wes says to Eli and Colton.

They both look at me.

“You quit the team?” Eli asks.

I toss my napkin on the table. “I’m done talking about this. I’m getting out of here.”

“You don’t have your car,” Wes reminds me.

“Then I’ll walk.”

“It’s five miles. You’re not walking. Just sit there and wait until we’re done.”

I sit back, folding my arms over my chest, watching them eat their ribs.

“You had a good thing going with her,” Eli says. “Too bad you fucked it up.”

“When I took her out,” Colton says to Eli. “She wouldn’t stop talking about him. I finally just asked her why she was out with me when she wanted to be with him.”

“And what’d she say?” Eli asks.

“That he didn’t want that. That Theo didn’t like her like that.”

I look at Colton. “She knows I liked her like that. We had sex. I think that

made it clear I liked her like that.”

“I meant as a girlfriend,” he says. “She said you didn’t see her that way and that it’s not what you wanted.”

“I never told her that. And if she wanted a guy who saw her as a girlfriend, then why the hell was she out with you?”

“Probably to make you jealous.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t work.”

He laughs. “You’re full of shit. You wouldn’t even talk to me that week I took her out.”

“I was busy. It had nothing to do with being jealous.”

“You’re gonna lose her if you don’t fix this,” Wes says to me.

“I already told her I wasn’t leaving. She didn’t believe me.”

“Because you still think you might. You just told us you hadn’t decided.”

“Okay, but until I do, she doesn’t need to be assuming the worst.”

“She loves you,” Wes says. “And now she thinks you’re leaving. Do you really think she’s not going to be upset by that?”

“She doesn’t love me. We just started dating.”

“She loves you,” Eli says, eating his ribs.

“If she didn’t,” Colton says, “she would’ve kept going out with me.” He points to the barbecue sauce. “Pass that over.”

I hand him the bottle. “You guys are just saying this shit so I’ll stay here.”

“We don’t care what you do,” Wes says. “It’s your life. You can do what you want. We just think you’re stupid to leave your school, your friends, and the girl you love just because you don’t want to deal with Curt.”

“What do you expect me to do?” I ask. “Be friends with the guy? Hang out with him and do father-son shit? Fuck that. The guy took off before I was born and now he wants to walk back into my life and be a dad? He knows I don’t want that. If he cared about me even a little, he’d quit his job and get the hell out of here.”

“Maybe he would,” Wes says. “If you talked to him.”

“He’s not gonna leave his job. He just moved here. He’s not gonna go find another job and move again because of me.”

“Then I guess you have to decide. Find a way to get along with him or run away. Just like he did. Like father, like son.”

I bolt up from the table. “Don’t you dare fucking compare me to him! We’re not the same.”

“Running off instead of dealing with shit?” Wes nods. “Yeah, you’re

right. You're nothing alike."

"Hurry up and finish. I'll wait outside." I storm out of the restaurant, fuming over what Wes said. I'm nothing like Curt. The situations aren't even close to being the same. He left his kid and the girl he loved. If I go, I'm leaving school and... the girl I love.

Shit. The idiot was right. Taking off, leaving Darcy—it's like what Curt did, leaving my mom. I don't have a kid, but I have friends and a life here. And a girl I love.

I love Darcy, but I'm not ready to tell her that. I didn't even want to admit it to myself, but it's true. I love her, so how can I leave her?

But if I stay in town and stay on the team, I'll have to see Curt almost every day—at the gym, at practice, on the field.

Why did he have to show up here? Why now? Why didn't he leave when he found out I was his son? Before I knew who he was? He's already messed up my life once, and now he's doing it again. And I'm letting him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DARCY

“YOU WANT BREAKFAST?” Theo asks as I come into the kitchen. It’s Sunday morning and Theo’s making chocolate chip pancakes, my favorite kind. I could smell them as I was coming down the stairs.

“No, thanks,” I tell him, getting a glass of water. “I’m going out.”

“Now?” He checks the time. “It’s only eight o’clock.”

“I’m meeting Avery at the diner near campus.” I gulp down the water, then set the glass in the sink.

“Is Wes going?”

“No. It’s just us girls.” I go to the closet to grab my coat.

“What time will you be back?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to do something. Maybe go see a movie?”

“I can’t. I have to study.” I put on my coat. “Have a good day.”

“Yeah, bye,” I hear him say as I leave.

Theo and I are back to being roommates and nothing more. It’s not what I want, but until I know what he’s doing, I need to stay away from him. I love him, but I can’t keep being his friend and his girlfriend if he isn’t sure enough about me to stick around. I know the situation with Curt is difficult for Theo, but running away isn’t the answer. He can’t see that, which makes me think our relationship never would’ve lasted, even if Curt hadn’t come along.

“Am I late?” I ask Avery, seeing her at the table with two mugs of coffee.

“No, I was early. I ordered your coffee.”

“Thanks.” I sit across from her and pick up the menu. “Theo made me pancakes. Chocolate chip. My favorite.”

“He’s really trying.”

“I don’t know why. It’s over between us.” I feel a lump in my throat as I say it.

“It’s not over.” Avery takes the menu from me and sets it down. “Why don’t you try talking to him?”

“There’s nothing to say until he makes a decision.”

“He told you he wasn’t leaving.”

“He also said he was considering it. So what am I supposed to believe?”

“I can’t see him leaving. His whole life is here.”

“He quit the team and keeps skipping his classes. That’s a pretty good sign of what’s to come. If he keeps missing class he’ll have to drop out of school and then he’ll have no reason to stick around.”

“You’re the reason. Theo loves you.”

“If he loved me, he wouldn’t be thinking about leaving.”

“He’s just confused. He doesn’t know how to handle the situation with Curt.”

“But he’s not doing anything about it. And doing nothing isn’t going to change anything or make it better. It’s like he’s waiting for something to happen, but it’s not.”

“So what are you going to do?”

I hesitate. “If I tell you this, you can’t tell anyone, especially Wes.”

“Darcy, you know I don’t keep secrets from Wes. I tell him everything.”

“Then you have to make him promise not to tell Theo.”

“I can do that. So what is it?”

“I’m going to go see Curt. Maybe today. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Why are you going to see him?”

“I’m going to ask him why he did it. Why he left all those years ago. He tried to tell Theo, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“I don’t think he wants to know.”

“But what if knowing would help Theo understand why Curt left? Maybe if he understood, Theo could forgive him and be okay with Curt being here.”

“I don’t see that happening. Even if he had a good reason for leaving, the damage it caused can’t be changed. Theo blames Curt for his mom’s drinking.”

“Then if Theo won’t forgive him, I need to find a way to make Curt leave.”

“If he was going to leave, he would’ve done it by now.”

“I’m still going to try. I’m going to tell him what him being here is doing to Theo and ask if he’ll leave town.”

“Darcy, I think this is a really bad idea. If Theo found out you did this, he’d—”

“He won’t find out unless you or Wes tell him. Avery, I have to do this. I have to at least try to get Theo to stick around.”

“You shouldn’t have to. He should work this out himself so he can stay here with you.”

“He should, but he won’t.”

“Then maybe he’s not the right guy for you.”

“What are you saying? That I should give up on him?”

“I’m saying the right guy would do everything possible to be with you. I get that Curt brings up painful memories for Theo, but he needs to get over it. We all have bad memories from the past. Whenever I go home, I have to drive down the street where my dad died. It hurts and I hate it, but it’s the only way to get to my house. I didn’t stop going there because I have to drive down that street.”

“Maybe Theo will get to that point eventually, but he’s not there yet. I’m not even sure he’s accepted that Curt is really his dad. He thought he’d never see him again and then he just showed up. He wasn’t prepared for it.”

“Yes, but Curt is his past. And you’re his future, or you could be if he’d deal with this and commit to staying.”

I look down at the table. “I don’t know if he’ll do that.”

“Then you need to let him go. You deserve better than to wait around for him to make a decision. At the very least, he could talk to you about it instead of making you wonder what he’s thinking.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I look up at her. “I’m just not ready to let him go.”

The waitress shows up and we order breakfast. I don’t say anything more about Theo. Avery doesn’t think I should talk to Curt, but I need to. I can’t just sit around doing nothing, waiting for something to happen.

“You want to come over?” Avery asks as we’re walking out of the restaurant. “I could show you those new jeans I got. Wes thinks they look great on me, but he says that no matter what I’m wearing. I need another opinion.”

“Maybe some other time. I have to go home and work on a paper that’s due tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later.” She walks to her car.

I get into mine and scroll through my phone until she leaves. I didn't want her seeing me going the opposite direction from home. I drive out of the parking lot and head to Curt's apartment. Yesterday, I looked up where he lives. It's an apartment near campus that houses a lot of college students. I'm surprised Curt would want to live there. I've heard it's loud and the cops are always going there to break up parties. But maybe it's all he could find this time of year. In a town this size, there aren't a lot of options for housing, which is why I ended up living with Theo.

"Just a minute," I hear Curt say after knocking on his door.

My heart's beating fast and my palms are sweaty. Part of me wants to leave, but it's too late. I'm here and Curt just opened the door.

"Darcy," he says. "What are you doing here?" He looks out at the hall. "Is Theo with you?"

"No, it's just me. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. Come on in." He steps aside and I go into his apartment. It's a small studio that still has boxes he hasn't unpacked scattered all over the floor. "Sorry for the mess," he says. "I have too much stuff and not enough space. But this place was all I could find."

"Yeah, it's hard to get housing around here." I stand next to his couch, which is covered in clothes, reminding me of Theo and how he used to leave clothes everywhere.

"Let me move these so you can sit down," Curt says, gathering up the clothes and tossing them in a laundry basket near the door.

"I won't stay long," I say, sitting on the couch. "I just wanted to talk about something."

Curt pulls over a chair that was next to a small dining table and sits down. "I'm guessing this something is about Theo?"

"Kind of." I pause. "That day you came over to the house, you said you wanted to explain why you left."

"But Theo didn't want to hear it."

"Would you tell *me*? I know you don't really know me, but I thought maybe if I understood what happened, I could talk to Theo about it."

"I think it'd be better coming from me."

"But he won't listen to you." I turn toward Curt. "Would you tell me what you were going to tell Theo that day?"

Curt rubs his jaw, the same way Theo does when he's thinking. It's kind of freaky, like I'm looking at an older version of Theo.

“I wasn’t a good kid,” Curt says. “I got in a lot of trouble. I don’t know how much Theo’s mother told him about me, but if she told him anything, I’m sure it wasn’t good. And it wouldn’t have been a lie. I fully accept that I was a bad kid who got into trouble. My parents weren’t around much and I got myself in with the wrong crowd. Sherry tried to get me on the right path, but I was too stubborn and immature back then to listen to her. When we found out she was pregnant, I panicked. I wasn’t ready for a kid. I was still a kid myself. Sherry wanted to get married and live with her parents until we could save up some money to get a house. It was all too much. I wasn’t ready for any of that.”

“So that’s why you took off? Because you weren’t ready to be a dad?”

“No, that wasn’t it. It’s true I wasn’t ready, but Theo was coming whether I liked it or not. I couldn’t avoid it, and I knew we’d need money to take care of him. But instead of getting a job, I started selling drugs.” He looks down. “Sherry didn’t know. I didn’t want her to. She always put me on a pedestal, thinking I was better than I was.” He looks up at me. “Selling drugs got me into even more trouble. One night a deal didn’t go well and a guy got shot. Died right in front of me. He was working for another dealer, a guy who was trying to take over that part of town. The dealer accused me of killing this guy. He ordered me to hand over my customers to pay for what I’d done. If I’d agreed to it, my boss would’ve had me killed. I had no way out. I didn’t know what to do.”

“And Theo’s mom didn’t know any of this?”

“I didn’t want her to. I didn’t want her involved in it. These were dangerous people. Make one mistake and you’re dead.”

“So you took off so you wouldn’t be killed.”

“It was the only thing I could do to protect not just myself, but Sherry. I was worried they’d do something to her if I didn’t do what they said. Both my boss and the other dealer were making competing demands and telling them no wasn’t an option. I knew they’d either kill me or go after Sherry and the baby to show me they weren’t messing around. I couldn’t risk it. I had to get out of there.”

“Where’d you go?”

“I joined the military. Got shipped overseas. When I got out of the military, I got a job coaching football at a middle school. Football was really all I knew. I was never good at school. I couldn’t pay attention in class. But I knew football and I was good at it. I proved myself at the middle school,

moved up to the high school, and eventually got a job at a college. After a few years there, I ended up here. I'm sure Theo wouldn't believe this, but I honestly didn't know he went to school here until I saw him at the mall that day when you two were shopping. Even then, I wasn't sure it was him. I could see the resemblance, but I didn't believe it. I raced home that day and looked at the names on the team roster and that's when I knew it was him. It had to be. He has his mother's last name and he looks just like me."

"Why didn't you tell Theo who you were?"

"I wanted to get to know him. I knew if I told him who I was, there was a good chance he wouldn't speak to me. I know it was selfish, but Theo's my son, my only child, and I wanted a chance to know him before he told me to get lost."

"Have you told his mom what happened? Why you left?"

"I tried, but she wouldn't listen. She hung up on me and told me to never call back. And I get it. I screwed up. I made some really bad decisions that led to me having to leave her, and leave our son. I'll always regret that. I wish things could've gone differently."

"You need to tell Theo this. He needs to know you didn't leave because you wanted to, but because you had to."

"I don't think it'd make a difference. It's true I had to leave, but it's because of something I did. I was stupid and careless. I put Sherry and our son at risk."

"You were only 18. Kids that age make mistakes."

"But this was a big one. One I couldn't fix. I don't expect Theo to forgive me for that. I just wanted him to know I didn't leave because I didn't want to be his father. I left to protect him and his mother from the mess I'd created."

"Even if knowing this doesn't change anything, Theo still needs to hear this."

"Do you think you can get him to talk to me?"

"I don't know. I'll try." I get up. "I need to go."

He walks me to the door. I leave and go out to my car.

If Theo knew Curt left to protect him and his mom, maybe he'd forgive him. Maybe he'd stay on the team, stay in college, and stay in town.

But how do I tell Theo why Curt left without telling him I went to see him? If Theo found out I did that, he'd never talk to me again. He told me to stay out of it, and I wanted to, but nothing was happening. I had to do something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THEO

“WES!” I yell as he leaves the English building.

He looks up and sees me coming toward him.

“What are you doing here?” he asks. “You back in class?”

“Yeah, and shit, I’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“Does this mean you’re staying?”

“Yeah, I guess it does.”

“You guess, or you know?”

“I’m staying. I can’t—”

“Hey, Theo,” a girl says as she walks past me. She’s really hot and smiling at me, but I’m not interested. Darcy’s ruined me for other girls. All I want is her.

“You can’t what?” Wes asks, bringing my attention back to him.

“I can’t leave Darcy. We’ve been living like strangers the past few days and I can’t take it. I feel like I’ve lost my best friend.”

“Hey, what am I?”

“You know what I mean. Now that you’re with Avery, I never see you. We’re still friends, but—”

“Yeah, I get it. Darcy’s the one you go to now when you need to talk. Or just need someone.”

“Exactly. But it’s not like that anymore. When we talk now it’s about the hot water running out or deciding who’s going to buy groceries this week. It’s roommate stuff. We don’t talk about anything personal. And now I’m worried it’s too late, that we can’t go back to how we were.”

“Maybe just give it some time. Did you tell her you’re staying?”

“Not yet. I will when I get home. But I don’t know if it’ll make a

difference. She doesn't trust me. I told her I wanted her to be my girlfriend, then told her I might leave town. She's not going to want to get back together with me after that."

"She might. And if she doesn't, then try going back to being friends. If that goes well, maybe it'll turn into more."

"I don't want to lose her, but I feel like I already have."

"You haven't."

"How do you know? Did she tell you something?"

"I can't say. I don't want to get in the middle of this."

"Wes, I need to know my chances here. Is she even a little interested in getting back with me?"

He pauses. "You didn't hear this from me, but yeah, she is, so don't fuck it up."

I smile. "I'm gonna go talk to her. I'll see ya later."

"Hey, what about the team? You coming back?"

"I'm talking to Coach tomorrow morning."

"So that's a yes?"

"I'm thinking about it. Coach wants me to sit down with Curt and work shit out, but I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"You'll never be ready. You just have to do it."

"I can't talk now," I say, walking off. "I gotta get home."

"Good luck!" he yells as I walk across the quad.

It's Wednesday afternoon and I'm finally feeling like I'm ready to move forward. It's because of Darcy. When I imagined not having her in my life, I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave. I know it's possible she'll tell me she doesn't want to get back together, but I at least want her back as a friend. She's the person I go to when I need to talk, the person who truly gets me in a way other people don't. She even laughs at my stupid jokes.

I haven't figured out what to do about Curt, but I'm not letting him take away the life I've built here. My school, my friends, football, Darcy. I'm not giving all that up because of him.

"Theo!" someone yells as I'm walking to my car. Looking back, I see Curt running over to me. "Theo, wait!"

"I can't talk now," I say, picking up my pace. "I'm in a hurry."

"I just need a minute," he says, coming up to me.

"What do you want?"

"Did you talk to Darcy?" he asks, out of breath from running.

“About what?”

“About what I told her.”

“When did you talk to Darcy?”

“Last Sunday. She came to my place. Didn’t she tell you?”

“No. Why was she there?”

He shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I thought she told you.”

“Told me what? What did you say to her?”

He sighs. “She wanted to know why I left. So I told her. I thought that’s why you were considering getting back on the team.”

“It has nothing to do with you. If I could, I’d get you fired so I never had to see you again.”

He backs away. “Is that really what you want? For me to go?”

“I’ve wanted you gone since the moment I found out who you were. Do you really think I want you back in my life? I was hoping you were dead so there wasn’t even a chance I’d run into you one day.”

He looks down, then back up at me. “I’m sorry, Theo. I thought she told you. But even if she had, I see that it wouldn’t have made a difference. I truly am sorry for what I did to you and your mother.”

“Your apology’s a little late. Like 21 years too late.”

He nods. “I understand. Tell Darcy I appreciate her trying. That girl really loves you. I hope you know that. Goodbye, Theo.” He walks off.

I’m furious, my head feeling like it’s about to explode. Why the hell would Darcy go see Curt? After I told her over and over again to stay out of it?

He thinks Darcy loves me? If she did, she wouldn’t have interfered like that. She wouldn’t have betrayed me and gone behind my back to talk to Curt. What the hell was she thinking?

When I go into the house, Darcy’s on the couch, watching TV.

I walk up to her, grab the remote, and turn off the TV. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Do what?” she asks, her eyes bouncing around my face, seeing how angry I am.

“Talk to Curt. I just saw him on campus. He told me you went to see him.” I throw the remote on the floor. “Why the fuck would you go talk to him?”

“Theo, calm down,” she says as she stands up. “I just wanted to hear what

he had to say.”

“Why? He’s not your father. He has nothing to do with you. I told you to let me handle it. To stay the fuck out of it.”

“But you weren’t doing anything. You wouldn’t talk to him. You wouldn’t listen to what he had to say.”

“Because I didn’t want to. I don’t care what his fucking reason was. And I told you that! I told Curt that. You heard me. You were standing right there when I told him to leave!”

“You were upset that day he came here. I thought if more time passed, you’d be willing to hear him out.” She walks up to me. “Theo, if you knew why he left, why he had no choice, you might be able to forgive him.”

I laugh, a harsh, angry laugh. “No choice? That’s what he told you?” I walk behind the couch, pacing the floor. “There’s always a choice, and he chose to leave. That’s all I need to know.”

“But Theo, there’s more.” She races up to me. “He got involved with some bad people. Drug dealers. They were threatening him and threatening your mom.”

“And you believe that?” I huff. “You don’t think a guy like that would lie? Make up some stupid story to get me to forgive him?”

“I don’t think he was lying.”

“Did he have proof?”

“Well, no, but—”

“He used you, Darcy. He made up some sob story so you’d come running back to me and try to convince me to forgive him.” I shake my head. “I can’t believe you did this. I trusted you and you went behind my back and talked to him after I told you to stay out of it.”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want you to leave. I thought if you and Curt could work this out, you might decide to stay here.”

“I already did.”

“Did what?” she asks.

“I decided to stay, and it had nothing to do with Curt. I was staying because of *you*. Because I didn’t want to leave you. I wanted another chance with you. I was on my way home to tell you that when Curt stopped me in the parking lot and told me what you did.”

“Theo, I’m sorry. I was just trying to help.”

“By getting involved in something I told you to stay out of?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“I need to get out of here.” I storm to the door. “I can’t be around you right now.”

I go outside, slamming the door shut behind me. I get in my car and drive, not caring where I’m going. I just needed to get out of that house, away from Darcy. I’m so damn mad at her. She not only went and talked to Curt without telling me, but also believed him. She believed what he told her and stood up for him and took his side.

After an hour of driving around, I stop at a place for dinner. My phone keeps going off with calls and texts from Darcy. Wes and Avery keep calling me too. I’m guessing Darcy talked to them after I left. I’m sure they’ll take her side. They always do. I’m always the bad guy and I’m tired of it. I didn’t do anything wrong here. Darcy did, by talking to Curt when I told her not to.

When I leave the restaurant, I drive around some more. Just before ten, I finally head home. Wes’ SUV is in the driveway. I pull up beside it as he’s getting out.

“I’m not in the mood to talk,” I tell him as I get out of the car.

“I’m not here to talk,” he says as we go into the house. “I’m here to get the rest of her stuff.”

“What are you talking about?” I follow him up the stairs and down to Darcy’s room. It’s empty, except for her bed, her desk, and a stack of boxes. “What the hell’s going on?”

“She moved out,” he says, picking up the stack of boxes. “Colton and I will stop by tomorrow to get her bed and the desk.” He leaves Darcy’s room and goes down the hall.

“Where are you taking it?” I follow him down the stairs. “Where’s she living?”

“With Avery and me. We turned the spare bedroom into a guest room until she finds a place to go.”

“Wes, wait!”

He stops at the door. “What?”

I walk up to him. “Why’d she move out? Did she tell you?”

“You really don’t know?” He sets the boxes down. “You used to give me shit for being a jerk to Avery, but that was nothing compared to how you’re treating Darcy. She was trying to help you. She was desperate to find a way to get you to stay. And the thing is, she shouldn’t have had to do it. You should’ve wanted to stay. For her. You never should’ve even considered leaving her behind.”

“Yeah, I know. I wasn’t thinking straight. But I realized it was a mistake and changed my mind.”

“And changed it again when you found out Darcy went to see Curt.” He throws his hands up. “What the fuck, Theo? Make up your damn mind. If you love her and want to be with her, stop pushing her away.”

“She shouldn’t have talked to him. I told her to stay out of it.”

“Yeah? So maybe she made a mistake. Big fucking deal. People make mistakes all the time. Even you. And tonight you made one that you may not be able to fix.” He pauses. “I think it’s over, Theo. For good this time.” He picks up the boxes. “I’ll text you a time for when we’ll be over to pick up the furniture.” He goes out the door and I watch as he puts Darcy’s things in his SUV.

She’s gone. She moved out. And I don’t think she’ll ever come back.

Going up to her room, I look at how empty it is and feel an ache in my chest. I screwed up. Again. Even if I didn’t like what Darcy did, I shouldn’t have yelled at her like that. I shouldn’t have gotten that angry. I should’ve at least listened to what she had to say.

My phone rings. It’s my mom calling. She never calls on a weeknight, which makes me think something’s wrong. Just what I need. More shit to deal with.

“Hey, Mom,” I answer. “What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to talk to you.”

“We’re both here,” my dad says. “We’ve got you on speaker.”

It must be really bad if they’re both calling me.

“Did something happen?” I ask, leaving Darcy’s room and going to mine.

“Your mother had an accident yesterday,” my dad says. “She fell down the stairs.”

“Shit, are you okay?”

“I have some cuts and bruises,” my mom says, “but the doctor said I should be fine.”

“It could’ve been a lot worse,” my dad says. “She could’ve damaged her spine or had a head injury.” He pauses. “Your mother and I had a talk when we got back from the hospital.”

“About what?”

“My drinking,” my mom says. “I’m going to a treatment center tomorrow. It was my idea, not your father’s.”

“Mom, that’s great,” I say, relief washing over me. I’ve been waiting to

hear her say that my whole life, but instead she denied she had a problem.
“What made you decide to do this?”

“Steve, can I talk to Theo alone?”

“Of course. I’ll talk to you later, Theo.”

“Yeah, bye Dad.” I hear him walking out of the room and the door shutting.

“Theo, when you said you might leave school because of Curt,” my mom says, “it got me thinking that maybe I was the reason for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You blame Curt for my drinking and want to punish him for it.”

“Mom, that’s not it. I just—”

“You don’t know him, Theo. You can’t hate a man you don’t know. You hate what he did and how it affected me. You hate that he wasn’t there for you growing up.”

“Yeah, which is why I didn’t want to be around him.”

“I don’t want you leaving school to punish Curt in some kind of attempt to get back at him for what he did. That only hurts you, not him. I decided I needed to forgive Curt and let the past be the past in order for you to do the same. So I did. And I can’t tell you how much better I feel. It’s what made me decide to go into treatment tomorrow. I’m serious this time. I want to get better. Theo, I need you to let go of the anger you have for your father and stay in school.”

“I’m staying. I already decided that. I was going to call and tell you.”

“What about Curt?”

“I’ll just have to find a way to be around him.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“No.” I pause. “But Darcy went to see him.”

“Darcy? Why would she talk to Curt?”

“She wanted to know why he left. She thought if I understood why he did it, I wouldn’t be so angry at him. She was trying to help.”

“Do you know what he said to her?”

“He made up some story about having to leave town because drug dealers were threatening him. I didn’t let her tell me the rest. It was just more lies. I didn’t want to hear it.”

The phone is quiet.

“Mom? You still there?”

“There was a note. I got it right after he left.”

“What note? What are you talking about?”

“Someone left a note on my car. I thought it was some kind of sick prank.”

“What did it say?”

“If he’s hiding, we’ll find him. When we do, it’s over. For both of you. It gives me chills just thinking about it. I didn’t know what it meant. It scared me at first, but then I decided it was probably just kids playing a joke.”

“What’d you do with the note?”

“Tore it up and threw it out.”

“What are you saying? That you think Curt’s telling the truth?”

“He might be. I wouldn’t be surprised if he got involved with selling drugs. He had a rough home life. His parents were very abusive. He struggled in school, never had food to eat. I helped him the best I could, but I could only do so much.”

“How did you end up going out with a guy like him? He doesn’t seem like your type, and he went to a different school.”

“He had his problems, but he was very sweet.” Her voice softens, like she’s remembering back to those days. “Once he walked eight miles just to see me. It was over 100 degrees and he had nothing to drink and wore jeans because he didn’t own any shorts. He almost collapsed from heat exhaustion when he finally got to my house.”

“Why’d he do it?”

“It was my birthday. He’d made me a jewelry box in shop class and wanted to give it to me.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that? Everything you’ve ever told me about him has been bad.”

“That was me wanting you to think poorly of him because *I* did. I was angry at him and wanted you to feel the same. But I shouldn’t have done that. Curt was a good man until he left us. And maybe that story he told is true. Maybe he had no choice but to leave.”

“And never come back?”

“Maybe if you talked to him, he’d explain it to you.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Theo, don’t avoid him because of me. I won’t be mad at you if you want a relationship with him.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“Just give it some time. You don’t need to decide right now. I wish we

could talk more, but it's getting late. I need to finish packing.”

“Can we talk while you're there?”

“No, but you can always call your father.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“I love you, honey.”

“Love you too.”

I end the call, wondering if Curt told Darcy the truth. What if he really did have to leave? But if he did, why didn't he come back? And why didn't he tell my mom what really happened?

I don't want to do this, but I need to. I need to talk to Curt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THEO

THE NEXT MORNING, I go see Coach Daley to tell him I want back on the team.

“Come on in,” Coach Daley says, noticing me at the door to his office.

I walk in. “Can we move this meeting to later?”

“Why? You got something better to do?”

“I need to talk to Coach Hensley.”

“He’s not here.”

“Where is he?”

“Home packing.” Coach Daley huffs. “We gotta start the whole damn process over again. Probably take us a year to find another coach.”

“What are you saying? That he quit?”

“Gave his notice late yesterday. Probably thanks to you and whatever fight you and him are having. If you weren’t one of our best players, I wouldn’t let you back on the team after this.” He eyes me. “You’re coming back, right?”

“Yeah, but I need to talk to Coach Hensley. Do you have his address?”

“It’s those apartments over on Sycamore. He’s 302.” Coach Daley gets up from his chair. “You think you can talk him into staying?”

“I don’t know, but I need to talk to him now. It can’t wait.”

“Let’s meet tomorrow. Same time.”

I race out of there and head to Curt’s apartment. I find him in the hall, holding a garbage bag.

“Theo,” he says, sounding surprised to see me. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Let me toss this out.” He opens the garbage chute and drops the bag in it. “I’m right down here.” He walks me to his apartment and we go inside.

“Coach Daley said you’re leaving.” I look around and notice all the boxes on the floor.

“I’m not a good fit here.” He goes over to the kitchen. “I’ll find another coaching job.” He takes some newspaper and wraps a glass.

I walk up to him. “You sure this isn’t about me?”

“You should get to class, Theo. You don’t want to fall behind.”

“You sound like a dad.”

He smiles a little as he wraps another glass.

“Did you ever want that?” I ask. “To be a dad?”

“At 18? No. At that age, I couldn’t even take care of myself, let alone a kid. But I would’ve tried.” He continues wrapping glasses, not looking at me.

“So is the story true? What you told Darcy?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” He glances at me. “How much did she tell you?”

“Not much. Just that you got involved with the wrong people.”

“It was my fault. I needed money and I wanted it fast. I had a kid on the way and your mother to support. I should’ve just got a job, but I didn’t think that way back then.”

“You sold drugs?”

“For awhile, yes.” He puts the wrapped glasses in a box.

“And what happened?”

He looks at me. “You really want to know this?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

We sit on the couch and he tells me the story. It sounds like he had a valid reason for leaving, which makes me rethink my past and what I thought about him. Part of me doesn’t want to believe him, and I wouldn’t if my mom hadn’t mentioned that note. It had to be from those guys who were after him. They were threatening my mom, but she didn’t know it. She didn’t know what Curt was involved in.

“Why didn’t you ever come back?” I ask.

“I didn’t want to put you and your mother in danger. I don’t know if those men are still there. For all I know, they’re dead, but I couldn’t take the chance. So I stayed away. I never thought I’d see you, and then I find out you’re at the school where I’d applied for a job. I couldn’t believe it. I still can’t.”

“You never looked me up online?”

“I didn’t want to. I knew if I did, I’d want to meet you. But a few months ago, I saw a kid your age I thought might be you. It wasn’t, but it prompted me to call your mother and ask if I could contact you. She said no, and I understand why.” He pauses. “Theo, I know you’re angry at me for not telling you I’m your father, but I wanted a chance to get to know you. I knew once you found out who I was that you’d want nothing to do with me.”

“I just needed some time. I have a long history of hating you.”

“I understand that.” He stands up. “It’s why I’m leaving.”

I get up. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t want to cause any more problems. You’ve got a good thing going here. You’ve got a lot of good friends and you seem happy.”

“I am, but you still don’t have to leave. Maybe we can work on this, spend some time together.”

“Is that really what you want?”

I pause to think about that. “Maybe not yet, but I’ll get there.”

“When that time comes, you can call me.” He walks back to the kitchen.

“Dad, don’t go.”

He looks up, hearing what I called him. I didn’t mean to. It just came out.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He comes over to me, his eyes tearing up. “No one’s ever called me that.”

“Stay. You don’t have to do this. You’re a good coach and the guys really like you.”

“Except for one.”

“I’m getting there. I just need more time to accept that you’re back in my life.”

“It’s okay to feel the way you feel. It’s okay to hate me. You needed your dad and I wasn’t there. I hurt your mother. Didn’t support her. Left her without telling her why. I don’t expect you to forgive me after all that. Let’s just make this goodbye. Until you decide you want to see me again.”

Looking at him and seeing the regret on his face, the anger I felt for him is replaced by sadness that he’s leaving. I don’t understand this. Just a day ago I hated him and wanted him gone and now I want him to stay.

“Goodbye, Theo.” He pulls me in for a hug. “You’re a good kid.” He lets me go, wiping his eyes as he smiles.

I hurry out of there before I tear up. I try to remember all the reasons I hated him, try to feel the anger again, but it’s not there. I need it and it’s not

there. I'm so confused right now. I need to talk to someone. I need to talk to Darcy, but I can't. Because I'm an idiot who fucked up too many times.

Colton calls as I'm going to my car.

"Hey, when are you coming over?" I ask, assuming he's calling about getting Darcy's bed.

"We already did. We got the bed and the desk."

Darcy's gone. She moved out. Without even talking to me. Why does that hurt so damn bad?

"I was calling about Coach Hensley," Colton says. "Did you hear he quit?"

"Yeah, I just talked to him."

"Why?" Colton laughs. "To tell him you'd help him pack?"

"No. And this isn't funny. I tried to talk him into staying."

"What the hell? I thought you wanted him to go."

"I did, but now I don't."

"Make up your damn mind. It's just like Darcy. One day you want her, the next day you don't."

"I always wanted her. I just fucked everything up. I seem to have a talent for that. Guess I'm like my dad that way. I mean Curt." I get to my car and open the door. "I need to go. I'll talk to you later."

It's almost noon, which is when I have class, but I can't make myself go. I'm too messed up from talking to Curt, finding out he's leaving, and from Darcy moving out.

Wes should be home now. Maybe I could talk to him. When I get to his house, Avery answers the door.

"What do you want?" she asks, scowling at me.

"Is Wes here?"

"No, he went to the store." She starts to shut the door on me.

"Avery, hold on."

She sighs and waits for me to continue.

"I messed up."

"Yeah. You did."

"I need to get her back."

"I don't know if you can."

"Is that what she said? That it's too late?"

A cold wind blows and Avery pulls me inside the house and shuts the door. "You can't keep doing this, Theo. You can't say you want her and then

push her away.”

“I didn’t mean to. It’s just that everything got messed up when Curt came back.”

“You were doing this even before Curt showed up.”

“I wasn’t pushing her away. She’s the one who said we couldn’t date.”

“You both did.”

“Exactly, so this isn’t all my fault. We’ve both been saying we shouldn’t be together, even though that’s what we want.”

“And when she finally agreed to be your girlfriend, you tell her you’re leaving town?” Avery shoves my shoulder. “What is wrong with you?”

“Yeah, I get it. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“I stuck up for you, Theo. I told Darcy you weren’t just some immature guy who only wanted sex, but that you cared about her and wanted a relationship.”

“I do.”

“Then you shouldn’t have told her you were leaving town. She’s not in a good place right now with her parents getting divorced. The Darcy I used to know believed life was like one of her romance novels where people fall in love and live happily ever after. But now she’s not sure love is real or that it’ll last, and it’s not just because of her parents but because of you, telling her you’re leaving without even considering how it’d make her feel.”

“Yeah, I get it. So what do—”

“And you shouldn’t have yelled at her for going to see Curt. She was just trying to help so you wouldn’t leave.” Avery’s eyes are narrowed and her hands are on her hips. She’s so angry you’d think she’s the one I did all this to, not Darcy.

“Are you done?” I ask.

“I guess. For now.”

“So what do I do? How do I get her back?”

“Do you really want her back, or are you going to change your mind again?”

“I want her back. Will you help me or not?”

“If I do and you screw this up again, I’m gonna send Wes after you.”

“Yeah, got it.” I look behind Avery to the living room. “Is she here?”

“No, she’s on campus. She went to the student center to put a note on the board asking if anyone needs a roommate.”

“When did she leave?”

“Like 10 minutes ago.”

“I have to go,” I say, racing to the door.

“Theo, wait!” Avery yells as I’m getting in my car. “She’s probably on her way home by now.”

She might be, or she might still be on campus. I need to find her. This can’t wait. She’s already moved out. Next she’ll find a guy, one she can trust to stick around. I want to be that guy, but I won’t be if I don’t hurry up.

When I get to campus, I park at the student center and go inside. The bulletin board where people post stuff is near the vending machines at the back of the building. I sigh in relief when I see Darcy there. She’s in front of the board, reaching up on her toes to pin a sheet of paper on an open spot at the top.

I walk up behind her. “Can I help?”

She turns around. “Theo. What are you doing here?”

I take the piece of paper from her and read it. “Looking for someone who needs a roommate.”

“Theo, give it back.” She tries to grab it from me, but I hold it up, out of her reach.

I keep reading. “I’ll pay rent on time, pick up after myself, and I don’t smoke or have pets. If interested, call the number below.”

“Theo, this isn’t funny. Give it back.”

I get my phone out and call her.

She takes her phone from her pocket, sees it’s me, and rolls her eyes.

“Aren’t you going to answer?” I ask.

“Theo, c’mon. Just give me the flyer.”

“Answer your phone first.”

She gives me an annoyed look as she answers. “Hello.”

“Hey, this is Theo Jenkins. I saw you were looking for someone who needs a roommate. Turns out mine just moved out so this is great timing.”

“Thanks, but I’ll keep looking.”

“You sure? You haven’t even seen the place. It’s a two-story house. It’s old, but it’s been updated and everything works. You should come check it out.”

“I’m sure it’s nice, but I don’t want a guy for a roommate. I already tried that and it didn’t work out well.”

“That guy was an idiot who should’ve told you how he felt instead of telling you he only wanted to be friends. I’m not that guy.” I lock my eyes on

hers. “And if you live with me, things will be different. I promise.”

“I don’t believe in promises, not after watching my parents break up.”

“Then just believe things will be different. Give me another chance, Darcy. Just one more. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“What exactly do you want, Theo? Because you’ve changed your mind so many times that I—”

“I want you to move back. And not as my roommate.” I toss her flyer on the floor. “I want you to move back as my girlfriend. I know I screwed up. I know you don’t trust me. Let me prove to you that you can.”

She ends the call and puts her phone away. I do the same with mine.

“Darcy, please, just give me another chance.”

She picks up the flyer, looking at it, then looking at me. “How do I know you won’t change your mind?”

“I’ll put you on the lease. If anything happens, you can kick me out. You can keep the house and find a new roommate.” I put my arms around her. “But I’m hoping you keep me around. Because I love you. And I don’t want to go another day without you.”

She smiles a little. “I just moved out. I’d have to move everything back. Set my room up again. That’ll take some time.”

“I want you to stay with me, in my room. We can turn the other room into something else.”

“Like a reading room with bookshelves and lots of pillows and a comfy chair?”

“If that’s what you want, then yeah. But didn’t you give away all your books?”

“They’re in boxes at Avery’s house. I wasn’t ready to give them away. They make me want to believe in love, even if those stories aren’t real.”

“This one is. And despite what I did or said, I really do love you, Darcy. Will you please move back?”

She looks at the flyer in her hand. “When?”

“Right now.”

“I’m kind of hungry.”

“Then I’ll take you to lunch first. I’m hungry too.”

She looks up at me. “You’re always hungry.”

“Yeah, and I’m out of food. We should get groceries after lunch.”

“I should probably see your house first. Make sure I like it. And the bedroom. I’m really picky about my bed.”

“Let’s go try it out.” I smile at her.

She crumples up the flyer and gives it to me. “Can you throw this out?”

I toss it in the trash, then take her hand as we walk out of the building. We go back to the house and barely make it through the door before clothes start coming off. We leave a trail of them on the stairs on the way to my room.

Turns out she likes the bed, or at least what we did in it. She agrees to stay and we celebrate by taking Wes and Avery to dinner that night. Avery watches me with Darcy, like she thinks I’ll change my mind about her again, but it’s not going to happen. Now that she’s back, I can’t imagine ever being without her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JUNE

THEO

“WHY DID I AGREE TO THIS?” I ask as I help Darcy make the bed in the room that used to be hers. Her plan to make it into a reading room never happened. I got her some bookshelves to hold all her romance books, but she likes to read them in bed. Then when she gets to a steamy scene, she gives me that look that says she wants to act out what she’s reading. And damn, some of those sex scenes describe things I haven’t even thought of doing. I love that Darcy’s into that stuff. I even got her a gift card to buy more books.

“I think it’ll be fun having her here,” Darcy says, pulling the comforter over the bed.

“We won’t have any privacy.” I toss the pillows on the bed. “No more couch sex. No more kitchen sex. No more—”

“It’s only for a few months,” Darcy says, coming over to me. “And we still have the bedroom. The shower. The car.”

“You need to stop talking about that or we’re gonna have to do it right now.” I grab her ass and pull her against me.

“Theo! Not in her room.” Darcy pushes me away.

“Then let’s go to *our* room.” I kiss her. “Before she gets here.”

“We don’t have time. She’ll be here in a few minutes.” Darcy picks up the colored pillows she bought and arranges them on the bed. “How’s it look? You think she’ll like it?”

“She’ll love it, but you didn’t need to go to all this work. She’s only here for the summer.”

“I know, but I wanted it to be nice.” Darcy stands back, admiring the room. “I’m excited to have her living here. It’ll be like having a little sister.”

“Don’t get too excited. Little sisters can be a pain in the ass.”

“Ella’s not a pain. She’s fun. I can’t wait to do stuff with her.”

“What about me?” I put my arms around Darcy. “You just gonna forget about me with my sister living here?”

“You won’t even be here. Football practice starts soon and then I’ll never see you.”

“It doesn’t start for a few weeks.”

“Yeah, but you’re training. You spend hours at the gym.” She smiles as she runs her hand over my bicep. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Okay, seriously. The way you’re looking at me? And touching me? It’s making me hard. We have to go do this.”

“Not now.” She backs away. “Later, once Ella’s asleep.”

“Asleep? I can’t wait that long.”

Darcy laughs as she goes to the closet. “Do you think I got her enough hangers?”

“Stop worrying about Ella. She should just be happy we’re letting her live here.”

“I thought you wanted her to.” Darcy walks back to me. “Now you’re acting like you don’t.”

“I do. I just don’t want her affecting when we have sex or how much we have. Do we really have to wait until she goes to bed?”

“Oh! I forgot to get extra towels. I’ll be right back.”

As Darcy leaves, I go to the window, waiting for Ella’s car to pull into the driveway. When my parents asked if she could stay with me this summer, I almost told them no. Things are going so well with Darcy and me that I didn’t want to risk anything changing that. But our relationship is strong enough now that I think it can survive a summer with Ella living here. And it’s only until August when she can move into her dorm room.

My parents are looking forward to a summer without kids. They’re spending this month doing some renovations to the house that they’ve been talking about doing for years. Then in July, they’re going to Europe for three weeks. When they get back, they’re visiting some friends in Maine, then going to Boston to see my dad’s sister. My mom’s been sober since getting out of rehab and it’s totally changed her relationship with my dad. They’re like newlyweds now. They’re always kissing and they can’t keep their hands off each other. I guess that’s good, but I’m not used to seeing it. Ella isn’t either, which is why she wanted a break from them.

Darcy returns with a stack of towels. “You think this is enough?”

“Yeah, she can only use one at a time.”

Darcy goes in the bathroom to put the towels away. I don't know why she's trying to make everything perfect for Ella. My sister already loves her. Darcy went home with me a few times last spring and spent time with Ella and my mom while my dad and I went golfing. Ella kept telling me not to screw things up with Darcy because she wants her to be her sister someday. I didn't tell her that I actually am thinking about marrying Darcy, but not anytime soon. I'm not ready for marriage and neither is Darcy.

“She's here,” I say, watching Ella's small red car pull into the driveway.

“Let's go,” Darcy says, hurrying out of the room.

I'm still making my way down the stairs when I hear Darcy at the door.

“Welcome to your new home,” she says.

I smile when I see her hugging Ella.

Ella notices me and smiles. “Hey, big brother.”

“Hey. Get over here.”

Darcy lets Ella go. “I'll take your bags.”

“That's Theo's job,” Ella says, coming up to me and giving me a hug.

“How was the drive?” I ask. “Get any speeding tickets?”

“No.” She lets me go. “You sound just like Dad.”

“I'm taking his place for the summer. Didn't he tell you?”

“That's a joke, right?” she asks, her brows rising.

“Not really. I told him I'd take care of you. I told Mom that too.”

“Yeah, but I don't have to listen to you.” She goes to the couch to sit down. “I'm an adult now. I'm on my own.”

I glance at Darcy, with a look that says I'm already regretting letting my sister stay here. I wanted to have a relaxing summer with my girlfriend, but instead I'll be watching over Ella, making sure she doesn't get into trouble. She didn't when she was in high school, but that's because my dad kept a close eye on her. And he was strict. He didn't let her get away with stuff. Now that she's living with me, she might try to do all the things she couldn't do when she was home. Drinking. Staying out all night. Who the hell knows what I'm in for with her?

“You're not on your own,” I say, sitting next to her. “While you're living here, you're my responsibility.”

“Meaning what?” she asks, putting her feet up on the coffee table.

“Meaning I need to know where you are. And you can't be staying out all night. You sleep here, in your bed.”

“Theo, seriously? I’m 18.”

“Yeah? So?”

“So I’ve been with guys before. I’ve had—”

“Why don’t we talk about something else?” Darcy says, racing over to us.

Ella was about to say she’s had sex, which infuriates me even though I know she’s not a virgin. Last summer, I saw birth control pills on her dresser and asked my mom about it. She said Ella had only had sex once, as far as she knew, but she put her on the pill just in case it happened again. My mom wouldn’t tell me who the guy was, knowing I’d want to smash his face in if I found out.

“Ella, are you hungry?” Darcy asks. “You want something to eat?”

“No, thanks. I stopped and got a burger on the way here.”

“I told you we were taking you to dinner,” I say.

“We can go later,” she says. “I was hungry. I couldn’t wait.”

She gets up and walks to the back window, looking out at the yard. “You guys have a lot of room back there. We should have a party.”

“We’re not having a party,” I say, noticing Ella’s clothes and how little they cover of her body. It’s summer, so I get that she wants to wear shorts, but the ones she’s wearing are so short I could see her ass cheeks when she leaned forward to look out the window. And she’s got on a tight tank top that’s cropped just below her boobs, showing off her stomach. Her body’s really changed the past year. Her boobs got bigger, even bigger than Darcy’s, and her legs got longer. She shot up in height and is now taller than my mom. She’s at least 5’9, maybe 5’10.

“Ella, do you want to go check out your room?” Darcy asks.

“Yeah, I’ve been dying to see it.” Ella perks up, excited to see how Darcy decorated it. Darcy’s really good at decorating. Ella’s not. Neither is my mom. She hired a decorator to do our house.

The two of them go upstairs. Moments later I hear squealing and “Oh my God, I love it!” from Ella.

I’m not sure I’m going to survive living with those two. Soon they’ll be taking over the TV, watching dating shows and romance movies.

There’s a knock on the door. “Theo, it’s me. You in there?”

I open the door and see Colton, shirtless, and wearing gym shorts. “What are you doing here?”

“Seeing if you want to play some hoops. I got the ball in the car.”

“I can’t. Ella just got here.”

“Shit, that’s right. I forgot she was coming today.”

“She’s upstairs, checking out her room with Darcy. You want to come in? I could use some testosterone in here to even out the flood of estrogen.”

Colton laughs as he comes into the house. “There’s no way you’ll survive all summer with those two.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

We go to the living room and sit down.

“Ella thinks she’s an adult now,” I say. “She’s telling me she can do whatever she wants.”

“She’s kind of right. She’s 18. That’s technically an adult.”

“Her age doesn’t make her an adult. She’s still a kid. She’s got a lot to learn before she can be considered an adult.”

“You sound like an old man,” he says, laughing. “Remember when you were 18? You thought you were an adult. So did I.”

“Yeah, but we’re guys. It’s different for girls. They have to be more careful. And Ella’s not, especially around guys. She believes what guys tell her.”

“She’ll be fine. She’s got her big brother watching over her.”

“Not all the time. I’ve got shit to do.”

“So have Darcy keep an eye on her.”

“But that’s the thing. I want to go out with Darcy, not have her babysitting my sister.” I sigh. “This was a bad idea. I wish I hadn’t agreed to this.”

“Too late now. She’s already here.”

“It’s only a few months. I guess I’ll survive.” I swipe through my phone and see Curt’s text from last night. “Curt’s coming here next week.”

“Oh, yeah? To see you?”

“Yeah, we’re having lunch and might play a round of golf.”

“Did you call him, or did he call you?”

“I called him. It’s been a month since I saw him. I thought it’d be good to meet up again before football practice starts.”

“How’s his job going? Did he say?”

“He doesn’t like it, but he said it pays well.”

After Curt left, he got a job coaching football at a private high school in Connecticut. He said the kids are rich and spoiled and don’t want to work hard, which makes coaching them difficult. He’s only been there a few months and is already looking for something else.

“Any chance he’d come back here?” Colton asks. “We still need an assistant coach.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll ask when he’s here.”

“Would you want that? Having him back here?”

“I’m not sure. I need to think about it. Being here and being my coach are two different things. It wouldn’t bother me having him here, but I don’t know how I’d feel about him coaching me. Maybe that doesn’t make sense, but it’s how I feel.”

“I get it. Being a coach is almost like being a dad and you’re not ready for that.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. I don’t feel like he’s earned the right to be my dad, at least not yet. But I do want to see him more. I’m ready to get to know him better. He asked if he can come to our games this year.”

“But he’ll be coaching.”

“High school. Their games are Friday. Ours are Saturday.”

“Yeah, that’s right. So what’d you tell him?”

“I told him I wanted to talk to my mom first, make sure she’s okay with it. It’s not like they’d be sitting together at the games, but she could run into him. I was going to call her tomorrow and talk to her about it. I don’t think she’ll have a problem with it. She’s doing really well. I think she’s finally moved on from all the stuff from her past.”

Ella and Darcy come down the stairs.

“Theo, my room is amazing!” Ella says. “I love it!”

“I told you she would,” I say, smiling at Darcy.

Colton gets up. “Hey, Ella.”

She stares at him, not saying anything.

He walks up to her. “You looking forward to a summer with Theo?” he says, laughing a little.

Ella’s staring at Colton’s chest, her mouth slightly open. That’s just great. My sister’s checking out my friend. Is this how it’s going to be with all my friends? I have the guys over and my sister gets a crush on all of them?

“Put a damn shirt on,” I say to Colton. “You shouldn’t be walking around like that.”

“It’s summer. And I was going to play ball. You sure you can’t play? Just for an hour?”

“I could,” Ella blurts out.

Colton looks at her. “You play basketball?”

“I used to. I was on the team.”

“In middle school,” I remind her. “You haven’t played in years.”

“I still know how.”

“Maybe some other time,” Colton says, smiling at her. At least he didn’t laugh at her. I almost did, imagining Colton playing basketball with her.

“What about tomorrow?” I say to Colton. “We could go in the morning before it’s too hot.”

“Yeah, that works.” He walks to the door. “Good seeing you, Ella.”

“Yeah,” she says, staring at him.

When he’s gone, Ella goes to the door. “I’m gonna go get the rest of my stuff.”

“Leave it,” I tell her. “I’ll get it.”

“That’s okay. I can do it. It’s not much.” She goes outside to her car.

I walk over to Darcy. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“How she was looking at Colton.”

“Every girl looks at Colton that way. He’s hot. I had a crush on him for over a year.”

I put my arm around her. “Until you realized I’m so much better than him.”

“My point is, Ella’s at college now. She’s going to be looking at a lot of guys that way.”

“Yeah, and I don’t like it. She’s here to go to school, not look at guys.”

“She’s going to do more than look at them,” Darcy mutters.

“You’re not making me feel better. I don’t want to even think about her being with guys.”

“But you know it’s gonna happen, right? She’s gorgeous. Guys are gonna want to go out with her.”

“Yeah, well, they’re gonna have to get past me to get to her.”

“Are you saying you’re not going to let her date?”

“She doesn’t need to. She needs to spend her time studying and going to class, not hanging out with guys.”

Darcy laughs. “You don’t even have kids and you already sound like a dad.”

“Maybe I won’t have kids. It’s too much stress.”

Darcy frowns. “Are you serious? You don’t want kids?”

“I’m joking. Of course I want kids. Who else is gonna play video games

with me? Colton's not gonna stick around forever."

"How many do you want?" she asks.

I wrap my arms around her. "Are we really talking about this?"

"It's just a question. I didn't say you were having these kids with me."

"Who else would I have them with?"

"Whoever you end up with."

"What if I want that to be you?"

She slowly smiles. "Three."

"Three what?"

"Kids. I want three. Or maybe two, but definitely not one. I didn't like being an only child."

"I'm good with three. Or maybe four. And all boys. Girls would give me a heart attack, especially during the teenage years."

"I don't think you can control what you get."

"Then I'll have to up my cardio. Get my heart in shape for what's coming."

She laughs, then kisses me. "I love you."

"I love you too." I kiss her, a longer, deeper kiss.

"Not this again," I hear Ella say. "You guys are just like Mom and Dad. Please tell me you aren't like this all the time."

I turn to Ella, keeping my arm around Darcy. "We are. We might even be worse than Mom and Dad."

"Great," she says, rolling her eyes. "I'll be up in my room."

"Ella, don't go," Darcy says.

But she's already running up the stairs.

"She needs to get used to it," I say, bringing Darcy back into my arms. "I'm not going to stop doing this because my sister's here."

"Let's take her somewhere. She just got to town. I don't want her spending the night alone in her room."

"Where do you want to go?"

"There's a music festival at the park. It's been going on all day. All different bands. Wes and Avery are there. We could introduce them to Ella."

"And have her checking out Wes? Yeah, I don't think so."

"Theo, you can't be so strict with her. She wants to have fun this summer and meet people and go on dates."

"She's not dating my friends. There's no way that's happening."

"You said the same thing when I wanted to date your friends."

“And good thing I did or you might’ve ended up with one of those idiots instead of me.”

She smiles. “I’m glad I got you.”

I HOPE **you enjoyed *The Rules We Break!*** Colton’s story is coming next! He’s known around campus as being a player but the right girl could make him change his ways. But what if that girl is Theo’s sister? The one girl who’s off limits?

To find out when Colton’s book is coming out, along with other book news, exclusive bonus scenes, and giveaways, join my newsletter. It’s free and you can unsubscribe at any time. [Click here to sign up!](#)

Want to read Wes and Avery’s story? It’s available now at Amazon! [Go here](#) to get your copy of *The Rules We Make!*

And for even more college romance, check out the [Jade Series](#), an angsty, opposites attract story of forbidden love. Here’s an excerpt from *Choosing You*, book one.

THE LINES on the track are like a map telling me where to go. I follow their orderly path, my arms and legs moving in a rhythmic pattern. My body repeats the motion effortlessly, leaving my mind to replay what just happened.

I see a girl at a party. She’s drinking. She never drinks. Ever. But there were no other options. It was history repeating itself. Like the script had already been written and she just had to let the scene play out. For 18 years, she promised herself this would never happen. And then it did. She lost all control within a matter of seconds.

That girl was someone else. I will never be her. And I will never be her mother. I refuse.

My legs take longer, quicker strides as I become aware of my body again. I pump my arms because I’m not going fast enough. I still feel all of it. The confusion. The rage. The pain. And I just want it to go away.

The cold night air clings to my skin, cooling the sweat and sending an icy

chill through me. My arms and legs ache and my lungs burn from inhaling the frigid air. But I keep going. Because I like feeling this pain. I understand it. And it keeps my mind off the pain that I can't understand.

A drop of rain hits my face. Then two, then three. Soon rain pours from the sky, stinging my skin.

"Jade, what the hell are you doing out here? I've been looking everywhere for you! Jade!"

It's Garret, the boy who made the girl live out that scene at the party. The scene that was never supposed to happen.

My eyes remain on the lines in front of me and I run past him like he's not even there.

"Jade, stop! Wait!"

I make another loop around the track as he continues to call out my name. As I approach him again, he moves into my lane and I veer to avoid him.

There's a sharp tug on the back of my shirt and I stumble forward to a stop. I'm gasping for breath as Garret turns me around and holds me against him so tight I can't move despite my efforts to break free.

"Stop." He says it quietly now as he presses my head against his chest. "Just stop running."

I give up trying to fight him and let my body collapse into his.

A minute ago I never wanted to see him again, but now I don't want him to let me go.

"Tell me what's wrong," he says. "If it's something I did, I'm sorry. I'll fix it."

The cold rain continues to pour down in a steady stream. My shorts and shirt feel heavy against my skin and I shiver as the wind blows around us.

He runs his hand along my arm. "What are you doing out here? It's freezing and you're soaking wet. Let's go inside."

My legs aren't ready to move. My entire body is aching, leaving my emotions numb, just the way I want them.

"Jade, talk to me."

I look up and see him watching me, waiting for some kind of answer. Before he can speak again, I reach up and press my lips to his. I shouldn't be kissing him so I don't understand why I'm doing this. But I don't understand anything right now.

Garret gently pulls away. "Tell me what's going on. Why are you out here? Why were you at the party? And why were you drinking?" His voice is

filled with so much worry and so much concern. After seeing him at the party I don't know why he even cares. But I know he does. I can feel it and I can see it in his face and it pisses me off. I don't want him to care about me. Not now. Now after what he did.

I push away but his arms tighten around me. I won't look at him. Because when I do all I see is the image of him coming out of that room. With her. And then I see the vodka bottle and it reminds me of my mom and that letter she wrote.

It's too much. It's too many emotions. I want the numbness back.

The rain continues to pour and I shiver again.

"We're going inside." Garret's tone is forceful. He finally lets me go but grabs my hand, pulling on me to go with him. "Jade, come on. I'm not leaving here without you."

My mind is still racing, trying to make sense of things that make no sense at all.

When I don't move, he picks me up and carries me up the hill to our dorm.

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