



**THE
SPACE
BETWEEN
NOW
& FOREVER**

THE SPACE BETWEEN DUET
BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELISSA TOPPEN

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Chapter One

Remi



Memories. Such an inconsequential word, and yet the very thing that defines our existence. What are we if not for our memories? Who are we? Who would *I* be without the memory of what came before? Without the memory of *her*?

Aspen...

I remember the first time I saw her in perfect detail—the moment etched so deeply into my brain that if I close my eyes, I can still see her sitting at the back of the classroom, her blond hair, kissed with pink, pooling over both of her shoulders like a protective barrier.

I don't know what called me to her, only that I felt drawn to her in a way I couldn't explain. Like the universe was trying to tell me something.

And I listened.

I'll never forget the way she looked at me when I slipped into the desk next to her. The way her big, hazel eyes regarded me, full of suspicion, like she couldn't understand why I had chosen to sit beside *her* when nearly every desk in the classroom was still empty.

She was pretty in a way I wasn't sure I quite understood in that moment. Understated. Breathtaking. Even at twelve years old, I knew she was something special. And when I cracked some lame joke and she smiled, well, let's just say I was an absolute goner.

We were inseparable from that moment on. The older we grew, the more I questioned if our friendship could be something more. But if I had learned anything about Aspen in the time I had known her, it was that what she *needed* was a friend, and that was more important than what I *wanted*. So, I

decided that was what I would be for her. Her best friend. Her confidant. Her shoulder to cry on. Her first phone call when she just needed to vent.

And one day, maybe I would be something more.

If only I knew then what I know now.

Turns out, no one can predict the future, even when it's the only certainty they've ever truly known.



The last six days have felt like a nightmare. I keep pinching myself, trying to wake up and end this torture I can't seem to escape, only it's not a nightmare at all, but my reality.

I knew something was off. I knew Aspen was keeping something from me. I just never dreamed this was it. That she and my brother were seeing each other in secret, and I was the idiot who was kept completely in the dark, trusting my *family* to have my back. I guess that was my first mistake.

But even knowing what they did—even knowing what *she* did—I can't erase the last twelve years. I can't erase *her*. Trust me, I've been trying. It's the most unnatural thing I've ever done, which is likely why my body and mind have rejected the attempts vehemently.

I guess that's how I find myself here now, standing outside her apartment building, watching her cross the street toward me. She hasn't noticed me yet, so I take a much-needed moment to gather myself before finally stepping out of the shadows.

Her eyes widen in surprise at the sight of me. Eyes rimmed with red and slightly swollen from crying. I try to ignore the ache that intensifies in my chest, but it's like trying to block out the sun when shelter is nowhere to be found.

Has she always been so beautiful?

What am I saying? Of course she has.

Only now, her beauty is shadowed by sadness. Her usually bright eyes, dull with pain. Her long, blond hair left in messy waves that look unbrushed. Her clothes slightly mismatched as if she didn't even realize what she was putting on this morning.

Simply put, she looks about how I feel—in shambles. The sight wrenches tighter at my gut.

Is her sadness for me or for my brother?

Does it really even matter?

“Can we talk?” I force myself to speak, though the words feel like razor blades as they slide their way up, slicing the sensitive flesh at the back of my throat. I grimace at the pain, my eyes dipping to her mouth as her shaky voice fills the air.

I can’t stop the memory from flooding back in at the sight of her soft lips. It happens so quickly I barely hear her response. The way it felt to kiss her after so many years. The way she responded to me, so natural, as if we were made to kiss each other, before she abruptly pulled away. It was confirmation of the undeniable connection we’ve always shared. Even in the light of what had happened, it was still there, maybe even stronger than it ever had been before.

That’s why, even after learning that she had been sleeping with my brother, I still kissed her. Even with my brother’s scent still lingering on her skin, I kissed her. Because I needed her to understand. I needed her to see that she belonged with me, even if she didn’t know it yet. And no one, especially not Sutton, was going to take that away.

It was desperate and ill-timed, I’ll admit, but in that moment, I’m not sure I thought much about the ramifications. Hell, I’m still not sure I care. Because honestly, what do I have to lose that Sutton hasn’t already taken from me?

“Sure.” I’m not sure if it’s the first time she’s answered or if it’s just now registering through the thick fog that seems to have permanently settled around my brain, but when I look back up, she’s already turned, glancing over her shoulder to make sure I move to follow her inside.

Neither of us speaks on the way up to her apartment. I don’t think I can pinpoint a single moment in our past where we’ve existed in such uncomfortable, tense silence. Probably because it’s never happened.

I don’t want it to be this way. I want to pull her into my side and drop my arm around her shoulders like I’ve done a million times before and pretend like nothing’s happened, like she didn’t tear my heart out of my chest and squeeze it until it ruptured in her hands.

But I can’t.

I can't pretend it didn't happen when all I can feel is the void in my chest, the hollow ache of where my heart once beat so full of life and hope. Now it's nothing more than a flutter, a ghost of what once was but is no more. Like a phantom pain. My brain still believes it's there even though my body fully recognizes the loss.

I thought I understood what heartache would feel like, even though I had never actually experienced it myself. When I watched friends go through it, I tried to act like I understood, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Nothing could have prepared me for this feeling. Like my insides have been clawed out, I feel empty in a way I cannot easily explain.

Aspen's hands tremble as she fumbles with her keys, and I resist the urge to take them from her and unlock the door myself.

Only, I can't save her anymore.

Now, I'm the one who needs to be saved. Whether *from* her or *by* her, I haven't yet decided. And while I've tried to convince myself of the former, I think the latter is the more likely outcome. Because as much as I hate what she did, I can't bring myself to hate her—not for a single moment.

When she finally gets the door unlocked, I hesitate before following her inside. Memories of the last time I was here hit me square in the chest, stealing the fucking breath from my lungs.

My vision blurs, and for a moment, all I see is Sutton standing in front of me in a rumpled T-shirt and boxers, his hair standing on all ends, the evidence of what they had been doing so apparent that I couldn't even give myself a single moment to swim in denial. The truth hit me with so much force it damn near knocked me from my feet.

"Can I get you a drink? I think there's still some beer in the fridge." Aspen's voice pulls me back to the present, my jaw tight with anger as I try to work through the array of emotions that pool in my gut.

"I'm good." I clear my throat, resisting the urge to ask what kind of beer my brother left behind. It's likely mine, as Sutton isn't much of a beer drinker, but the vengeful, petty side of my broken heart doesn't care.

"Okay." Aspen shifts her weight, crossing her arms in front of her chest the way she always does when she's trying not to fidget. "So..."

She lets the word hang in the air, like she's not sure what to say. Meanwhile, there are a million things *I* want to say. I just have no idea where to fucking start.

"I miss you." It's off my lips before I can take it back.

I don't want to say it. I don't want to admit how weak I feel without her. But lies and omissions are what got us into this mess and if we have any hope of digging ourselves out, we have to start being honest.

Both of us.

"I miss you." Tears fill her eyes again, and I refrain from pulling her close.

My pride simply will not allow it. Not yet.

"I don't know how to do this without you," I admit, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep myself from reaching for her.

"Me neither." Her chin quivers and I quickly glance down at my feet to avoid having to watch.

She did this. I try to remind myself. Everything she's feeling, it's on her.

Only, the knowledge does very little to calm the ache that swells in my chest.

I can't just turn it off. I can't just decide not to love her because she hurt me, no matter how much I wish I could.

"I just... I don't know how we move past this." I rock back on my heels, forcing my eyes back up to her face.

"Me neither." She repeats, uncrossing her arms just in time to swipe at a tear that springs free from her eye. "Remi... I—"

"Don't say you're sorry," I interrupt, not wanting to hear another apology, not wanting the fucking reminder of why we're here. "I'm just as much to blame as you are." I take the blame that isn't mine for reasons I don't fully understand. Then again, that's not true either. I understand why perfectly. Because I love her. Even though she lied to me, even though she betrayed me, I still want to protect her.

"You aren't," she disagrees with a slight shake of her head.

"I feel like half a person without you." I shift my weight from one foot to the other, my body responding to the uncertainty washing through my veins like a toxic poison.

On one hand, I want to pull her into my arms and never let go, beg *her* to never let *me* go. On the other, I'm not convinced I can forgive her, no matter how desperately I want to. Because I meant what I said. I do feel like half a person.

"I *am* half a person without you." Another tear snakes past her lashes. The knot in my throat tightens.

It would be so easy to pull her into my arms. But I can't pretend nothing happened any more than she can. The knowledge has built an invisible wall between us. One that we cannot see, but we can most certainly feel.

"I meant what I said, Pen." I give myself the briefest moment to change my mind before continuing. "I love you." I force myself to say, despite the way the words make me want to recoil. "I know you may not want to hear it, but it's true. I can't live that lie any longer. I can't. Because doing so is what brought us here." It takes a hell of a lot more effort to keep my voice even than it should, but somehow I manage to get it all out.

"I—" she starts, but I quickly cut her off for a second time.

"If you say you don't feel the same way, that's something I will have to learn to live with. But this"—I gesture between the two of us—"I can't live with this. With this distance between us. I tried. For the last week, I've tried and it's killing me, Pen. It's killing me not to talk to you every day."

"It's killing me, too." She swipes at her cheeks where more tears have now stained streaks down her soft complexion. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know," I admit. Because, well, I don't know.

I'd like to say I know without a doubt that we can move past this, but that would be a lie. I don't know if we can. I don't know if *I* can. But I know I have to try.

"Do you think you can forgive me?"

I think on her question for a brief moment before asking one of my own.

"Do you think..." I hesitate, second-guessing myself. "Do you think you could ever love me that way?" I force myself to finish, feeling so vulnerable that if you split me open from throat to belly button, I still wouldn't be more exposed than I am right now.

It feels like an eternity passes before she answers and with each eternal tick of a clock, the tension in my shoulders grows tighter. But even as I wait for the answer, I'm not sure what I actually want her to say.

"I don't know."

My stomach twists harder at her response. I'm just not sure if it's because she didn't say yes, or because she didn't say no. I still feel so confused about the way I'm feeling. I thought I knew—when I kissed her, I was so sure. Now, I'm not sure of anything outside of knowing that I *need* her in my life—whatever that looks like.

"Maybe we can try just getting back to us and then let the rest figure itself out?" Even as I say it, I'm not sure I should, or that I can.

Because of Sutton...

Just the thought of my brother makes my skin crawl. The thought of the two of them together, of him touching her in that way... I fight against the bile that rises in my throat.

"I'd like that," she replies eagerly, too eagerly really. But I understand it. I understand her desperation to fix this as much as I understand my own.

"But I don't think we can do that if *he's* in the picture." I'm not one to typically give ultimatums, but this is a hard limit for me.

I've made it this far without bringing up Sutton because this is about us, not him. But I will not compete with my brother either—never again. Not even for Aspen. Because I know how that scenario plays out. He will win. He always wins.

"He isn't." She tries not to seem bothered by this fact, but there's no hiding the pain that wells behind her hazel eyes.

She loves him, of that much, I'm sure. And while the thought feels equivalent to taking a knife to my chest and cracking open my ribs, the only thing that makes the pain manageable is the thought that maybe, just maybe, she loves me more.

"I need you to be certain that whatever was going on between the two of you is over," I reiterate, making sure there is no room for misinterpretation.

"It is." She nods. "I'm so sorry, Remi. For all of it."

"Me too." A sad smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

"So, what now?"

Again, the awkward tension between us leaves me uneasy. I've never felt anything but complete comfort around Aspen. Never felt anything but entirely myself. I'm in uncharted waters here with no sight of dry land.

"I don't know," I admit, pulling my hands from my pockets before reaching up to scratch my chin, which itches like hell, given that I haven't shaved in nearly a week.

Hard to shave when you can barely get yourself out of fucking bed.

"Maybe we could start with a drink?" Aspen offers, tucking a chunk of her blond hair behind her ear. I watch in slow motion as her fingers move through the strands, remembering all the times my fingers have touched the silkiness of her pink-hued hair.

My throat tightens as I realize that things will never be that easy between us ever again.

"I'd like that." I force a smile to my lips, but it feels just that—forced.

“We can go down to Jett’s Pub.” She suggests one of my favorite restaurants.

“You always did know the way straight to my heart.” My words seem to mean something different than they used to, and we both realize it at the exact same time.

“You know, it’s okay.” She moves toward me before I can fully recover from the thought. “I love you and you love me and we’ll find a way to be us again. Whatever that turns out to be.”

“I hope you’re right.” Torn between resentment and hope, I turn before she reaches me, tugging open the door and stepping into the hallway.

It immediately feels easier to breathe outside of her apartment. Outside of the space that weirdly still smells like my brother, as if his scent has been imprinted on everything she owns. The thought intensifies the weight on my shoulders.

How many times has he been here?

How many nights did they spend together?

How many times did she lie to me?

“Do you need a minute or are you ready now? Because I could really use that drink.” I turn to where she’s standing in the doorway, barely holding myself upright.

“I’m ready.” She joins me in the hallway, pulling the door closed before quickly locking it.

“Can I ask you something?” I wait to speak until we’re outside, until the evening air has somewhat soothed my frayed nerves, slowing to allow her to catch up to me.

“Anything.”

I hesitate, not entirely sure it’s a question I *want* to ask, but one I feel like I *need* to. I already know the truth—that much couldn’t be more apparent if it were written on the wall right in front of me in large, bold letters. But I need to hear her say it.

“You love him, don’t you?” Rocks fill the pit of my stomach as I wait for her answer. Only seconds pass, but it feels more like decades.

“Yes.”

I tug in a deep breath, but suddenly my lungs feel too heavy to accept the air.

I thought I needed to hear her say it.

Fuck if I was wrong...

“Why?” I blurt, having a hard time wrapping my head around why someone as incredible as Aspen would ever love someone as arrogant and self-serving as my brother. He could never offer her anything but heartache. Though something tells me she’s already figured that much out for herself.

“I don’t know.”

I don’t know. A statement I feel all too familiar with at the present moment. Because, well, I’ve never been less certain of what I actually *know* in my entire life than I am right now.

“He’ll never be able to love you the way you deserve.” I keep my gaze forward and my voice even.

“I know.” She seems to shrink into herself.

“And yet, you love him anyway.” Anger tugs at the edges of my voice.

“Not sure I have a choice in the matter.”

“Do you love him more than me?” I stop so abruptly that she’s two steps past me before she realizes I’m no longer next to her.

Spinning on her heel, she immediately reaches for me, the warmth of her hand melting away some of the icy anger lingering in my veins.

“I could never love anyone more than I love you.” She squeezes my fingers as if to say *I need you to hear me*. “And that is how I know we’re going to be okay.”

I wish I knew it too—that we were going to be okay. Because seeing the hurt on her face, I’m not so sure we are.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting.” I don’t release her hand, afraid it may be the last time I get to hold on to it like this.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting,” she repeats the sentiment back to me.

“Can we promise never to hurt each other again?” It’s a stupid question to ask, and yet, I ask it anyway.

“We can promise to try.” She squeezes my hand again.

“I guess for now, that’ll do,” I agree, because really, what the fuck else can I do.

I made my choice coming here tonight. I made the choice not to live without her. Now, all I can do is hold on for dear life and pray to God that when it’s all said and done, I still have her.

I haven’t forgiven her, but I have to try. If not for her, then for myself. Because I meant what I said. I am half a person without her.

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Chapter Two

Aspen



“So, I was thinking maybe we could get Mexican tonight.” Remi balances the umbrella between us, doing his best to shelter us from the rain. And while it’s better than no umbrella at all, the wind makes it impossible to keep ourselves completely dry, blowing rain at us seemingly from every direction.

Had Remi not shown up at my office to walk me home, I’d be completely soaked to the bone right now. I didn’t check the weather before I left home this morning, therefore I didn’t know to take my rain jacket, which I bought for situations just like this one, to work with me.

“Are you seriously thinking about food at a time like this?” I ask, shielding my face when another gust of air threatens to pelt us with water.

“I’m always thinking about food.” I can hear the laughter in his voice but don’t chance a glance at him, keeping my gaze forward.

I wish I could say things with Remi are completely back to normal. They aren’t. Even if we’ve both been content to pretend for the last month that they are. The easiness between us is gone, replaced by something else. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. Something that feels a lot like resentment.

And while he has every right to resent me for what I did to him, I can’t quite explain the resentment I feel in return. The resentment that eats away at me a little more each day, like a plague that keeps spreading, poisoning everything in its path.

“So what do you say?” he asks again when I still haven’t given him an actual answer.

“I think maybe I just wanna stay in tonight. This weather is awful.”

“Ever heard of food delivery?” he offers sarcastically, his hand going to the small of my back as he ushers me across the street toward my building.

I don’t respond until we duck inside, watching Remi do his best to shake the umbrella off in the doorway before drawing it closed.

“I don’t think I want to make anyone come out in this either.” I gesture outside as I pull my hair over one shoulder, the wet ends further dampening my shirt.

“So we stay in and scrounge something up. I’m sure you have something to eat in your apartment.”

“You want to come up?” I arch a brow.

Remi hasn’t been inside my apartment since the night he came over to work things out. He hasn’t said outright that he doesn’t want to be here, but I can sense it every time I mention hanging out here. He’s avoided this place like it carries a dark curse, and maybe for him, it does.

My stomach sinks slightly at the thought, but I refuse to let my mind drift to the one person I have tried like hell not to think about.

Sutton.

As soon as his name whispers across my mind, pain quickly follows. It starts as a hollow feeling in my hands and feet but then quickly spreads like an electrical current misfiring through my limbs until finally settling in my chest like my body itself is revolting against me. Against the loss of *him*.

He hasn’t reached out to me. I haven’t reached out to him. I think we both know it’s over. Though I would venture to say he’s easily moved on and probably has another *Olivia* in his bed, while I struggle to find the motivation to even get out of bed each day. I think, in a way, that makes it worse. Knowing that my pain is mine alone.

But I guess that’s not entirely true either. Because there is one other who shares my pain—Remi. Only I don’t find comfort in that knowledge. Understandably, it only brings me more grief.

“You really want to go back out in the rain to hang at my place?” Remi tugs me back to the present, arching a brow as he tries to force an effortlessness that no longer exists between us, no matter how much I wish it did.

“Not really.” I shrug a shoulder. “But are you sure you want to?” I hate to press the issue, but the last thing I want to do is burn all the progress we’ve made to the ground when he gets up there and the reality of our situation hits him smack in the face all over again.

Then again, have we really made any real progress at all?

He’s good at trying to pretend we have, but I know better. I can feel the distance between us. Feel the truth we refuse to speak festering in the background, threatening to eat us both alive.

We haven't actually dealt with what happened. In truth, we've barely spoken of it past that first night. Every time I try to bring it up, he changes the subject. I can tell he's unhappy, as I'm sure he can tell I am as well.

We haven't fixed anything between us, only slapped some duct tape over it to hide the cracks.

Eventually, it will all come to a head.

Something tells me he knows it, too.

"Do you not want me to?" He misunderstands my hesitance. Or maybe he doesn't misunderstand it at all.

"Of course I do. I just..." I shift my weight uncomfortably.

"Just say it, Pen. For fuck's sake."

I balk at his harsh tone, having not yet grown accustomed to his random outbursts of anger that seem to come out of nowhere. They rarely last more than a few seconds and he *always* apologizes, but it doesn't erase the damage they do. The damage *I* did.

"I'm sorry," he mutters as if on cue.

"Maybe you should just go home," I offer as gently as I can, tears building behind my eyes. I swear, I cry so easily now. It takes nothing more than a look to pull my emotions to the forefront. I guess that's what happens when you keep everything you're feeling bottled inside.

I can't confide in Remi. He'd never understand. In fact, the truth would only make him hate me more.

I still haven't decided what I'm going to do. How I'm going to proceed through the murky waters ahead. But I know that eventually, that's exactly what I'm going to have to do.

One can only live this way for so long. Torn between two people—one who wants me too much and one who doesn't want me at all.

When everything came to light, all I wanted was to make things right with Remi. Now, I'm starting to realize that may not be as easy as I had once hoped.

It doesn't help matters that Sutton has left a gaping hole in my chest that not even Remi can fill. I feel empty in a way I haven't felt since the day Remi sat down next to me in class all those years ago.

Somehow, I've managed to fuck everything up. And what's worse, I only have myself to blame.

I did this to us.

To all of us...

“Is that what you want?” It takes several seconds for the hurt on his handsome face to clear, and even then, it doesn’t disappear completely.

I keep hurting him, even when I try not to.

“No, but I think maybe...”

“Look, Pen, I’m sorry, okay?” He steps in front of me, forcing my gaze up with a nudge of his hand beneath my chin. “I know I’ve been awful. I’m trying.” The last part comes out as nothing more than a whisper.

“I know.” I choke back the thick emotion in my voice. “I’m sorry...”

“No, I’m sorry. Can we just try again?”

“Remi...”

“Please. We can order some food and I will give the driver a ridiculously astronomical tip and then we can just hang out. You know, like we used to.”

I resist the urge to point out that we’ve hung out several times over the last month, knowing that not a single one of those times was like it *used* to be.

It saddens me more than I could ever put into words—the damage I’ve done to our friendship. Remi was the best thing to ever happen to me and I treated him horribly and for what? A man who walked away at the first sight of trouble? A man who used me and dropped me when things got too real?

Taking a deep breath, I blow it out slowly.

I let Sutton break us. *I* broke us. And what’s worse, I’m continuing to do it by hanging onto these feelings and this anger. This loss and this grief. It’s killing me. But now I see, maybe it’s killing Remi, too.

“Okay,” I finally agree. “But only if you’re paying.” I shove his shoulder in an effort to reclaim a playfulness that has eluded our friendship for the last four weeks.

“Deal.” He takes my hand, pulling me toward the stairwell. “Now, the real question. One margarita or two?”

“They deliver margaritas?” I gape openly at him, wondering how I’ve never known this before.

“Yep.” He pops his lips, releasing my hand as he tugs the door open, waiting for me to slip through before following me inside.

As he’s always done, he walks behind me up the stairs, but he refrains from making any of his usual comments about my ass. I didn’t realize how much I would miss Remi’s filthy mouth until it was gone. Now I long for it.

I’ve given a lot of thought to what Remi said about being in love with me. I’ve thought about it for so long that my head has ached and my heart has

hurt.

Sometimes I can see it. Our future. The life we could have.

Other times, all I can see is Sutton. Like an invisible presence that never leaves, I just can't seem to shake him.

And I've tried.

Trust me, all I've done is try.

But even if you remove Sutton entirely, I'm just not sure my love for Remi extends beyond friendship.

I won't lie and say I didn't feel anything when he kissed me that night. I just don't know if what I was feeling was love or desperation or maybe a bit of both. Because in that moment I would have done anything to take away the hurt I had caused.

"In that case," I finally say after far too long. "Order two."

Lord knows I could use a drink.

"That's my girl."

A smile touches my lips, and for the first time in what feels like years, it feels genuine.

He hasn't called me *his girl* since the night he found Sutton in my apartment. Since the night everything went wrong.

It feels good to hear again. Because at the end of the day, no matter who was in my bed or in my heart, I was always Remi's girl. I don't think anything or anyone will ever change that.

I spend the next two hours eating chips and salsa and slurping on frozen margaritas while listening to Remi drone on about work. It seems to be the only truly safe topic as of late. And while I hate that this is the way it is, I'm also grateful to just have him here, to watch the animation of his expression as he impersonates his boss. At this point, I think it's safe to say we're both feeling the effects of the too strong drinks. I'm not drunk by any means, but it's enough that I almost forget the distance between Remi and me, the buzz of alcohol thrumming in my veins enough to quell the unease that seems to have buried itself permanently in my gut.

"And then, get this..." Remi snorts out a laugh, smacking the top of his leg as he flings forward. "Seth was so pissed that he hacked into his email and deleted everything."

"Wait, what?" I nearly choke on the drink that was halfway down my throat.

“You heard me. He deleted everything. All the contracts. All the correspondence with clients. All gone.”

“Oh my God.” My hand comes up to cover my mouth. “He got fired, right?”

“Nope.” Remi pops his lips dramatically, slurping back another drink out of the white Styrofoam cup in his hand. “Darren has no idea what happened. No one does.”

“Except you.” I needlessly point out.

“I don’t condone what Seth did, but Darren is a fuck hat and honestly, it’s been nice watching him panic the last few days, trying to recover everything he lost.”

“Can he...? Recover it, I mean?”

“Beats me.” He shrugs, dragging the straw between his teeth and sucking the last remnants of margarita from the cup. “Some of the IT guys have been helping him. I’m sure that eventually, they’ll figure out it was Seth, but in the meantime, I’m going to enjoy watching the show.”

“I can’t imagine what someone at my office would do if that happened. My guess, Charles would have heads rolling within the hour.”

“Why did that just give me the visual of heads rolling down a hallway like fucking bowling balls?” He chuckles to himself.

“Because you’re a sick fucker.” My face splits into a full smile at the shocked look on Remi’s face.

“Did you just call me a sick fucker?” He sets his empty cup on the end stand and I know instantly what’s coming before he lunges at me from the opposite end of the couch.

“Remi!” I squeal, holding what’s left of my margarita in the air to prevent it from flying across the room when his hands find my abdomen. I buck violently, my laughter vibrating through my whole body as I try to fight him off with only one hand.

He knows how much I hate being tickled. He’s lucky my priority is my drink or I’d probably be throwing punches, which I’ve been known to do when the tickling becomes more than I can take.

“Remi, stop!” I try to say it seriously, but it comes out riddled with laughter because, well, he’s tickling me and I can’t not laugh when being tickled, even if I despise it.

“You called me a sick fucker.” He reminds me, digging his fingers into my ribs, which he knows is my most sensitive part aside from my feet.

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.” I try to wiggle out from beneath him, but it does me no good, my small frame no match for his much larger one.

“Are you sorry, Pen?” He makes a move for my margarita, snagging it out of my hand. At first, I think he’s going to drink it, but instead, he sets it on the floor next to the couch. “How sorry are you?” His body shifts until he’s fully on top of me, his weight pushing me further into the couch.

I have two thoughts simultaneously.

One: kiss me.

And two: please don’t kiss me.

I’m not sure which is the more prominent thought.

On one hand, I want him to. I want him to kiss me so that maybe, just maybe, I’ll feel what I desperately want to feel.

On the other hand, I know that if he kisses me now, it will only further complicate an already impossible situation.

I can see it in his eyes, the same indecision, like he knows what he wants but isn’t sure of it at the same time. A feeling I’m all too familiar with.

“Pen.” The humor from seconds ago is gone, replaced by something I can’t fully place. Uncertainty. Want. Need. Regret.

“You can kiss me if you want.” My voice barely breaks the surface around us, dangling between us like a whisper.

I don’t know why I say it. Maybe because I’m desperate to know what kissing Remi feels like for real, given that last time my emotions were running so high I didn’t know what I was feeling. And maybe a little bit because I’m desperate to erase the pained look that tugs at his features.

His gaze flicks to my mouth for a brief moment before his eyes meet mine again.

“Are you sure?”

I nod, not able to say the words out loud, words deep in my bones I know I would regret.

Remi leans in so slowly that I swear it feels like an eternity before his lips finally brush mine. Like the first time he kissed me, excitement stirs in my belly, but when he deepens the kiss with a sweep of his tongue, the feeling falls flat somehow.

I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like my body recognizes the feel of him, but my heart can’t quite get itself on the same page.

I kiss him back because, well, I think in a way he needs to feel it, too. He needs to decide if he really wants me this way, or if he just doesn’t want

Sutton to have me. Because even though he's reiterated that he's in love with me, nothing about the way he looks at me convinces me it's true. He looks at me like he's always looked at me—like he loves me. Not like he's in love with me. Not the way Sutton looked at me, or I looked at him. Though, I don't know if Sutton was ever actually in love with me, but I do know he felt something, even if he tried to fight it.

Remi is the first to pull away, dropping his forehead to mine as he tries to regulate his breathing. Neither of us speaks right away. I think we both just need a moment to collect our thoughts.

"I'm sorry." Remi presses up, the weight of his body disappearing in an instant as he flops back down on the opposite end of the couch.

I quickly scoot into an upright position as well.

"Why are you apologizing?" I wring my hands together nervously, not sure I'm prepared for the way this goes, whichever way it goes.

"I thought I could do this... I thought..." He abruptly pushes to a stand. "I think I should go." He's around the couch and heading toward the door before I've even fully processed his movement.

"Remi." I twist, pressing up on my knees as I grip the back of the couch.

"This is on me, Pen. Not you." He shakes his head, slipping his shoes on. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

"Yeah," I croak, not sure why he's asking that when *he's* the one leaving.

He's out the door before I can say more, and while his hasty retreat has left me with more questions than answers, I feel like the kiss did give me some clarity. As much as I want to *want* Remi in that way, I just don't. I love him, more than anything, but like the first time he kissed me, I didn't feel any type of spark—not even a tiny one. When Sutton would kiss me, it would feel like my entire body was engulfed in flames. When Remi kisses me, there is no heat, no passion. He doesn't consume me the way Sutton does.

And while I know Sutton is gone and he's not coming back, it doesn't change what I feel for Remi. He is my best friend and deep down I think I've always known that's all he would ever be.



“You okay?” Remi nudges my foot from the other end of the couch, pulling my attention from the movie.

I blink, having not realized I was crying until this exact moment.

What the hell?

I can't remember the last time I cried while watching a movie, let alone *this* movie. The first time I watched it, when I was like ten, sure. But since? We've watched this movie dozens of times over the last twelve years. *The Man in the Moon*. It's one of my favorites and a constant go-to when we're not sure what to watch. Remi hates it. And while he's never outright said it, I know he only tolerates it because he knows how much I love it.

A young girl who falls in love with an older boy, only to find out that he's in love with her older sister. Then he dies and they both lose him. It's tragic really. And suddenly hits a little differently than it did before. And not because of the unrequited love or unconventional triangle, or at least, not just because of that. But also because of the secrets. The lies. Things that were left unsaid.

It's a stark reminder that life really is too short.

“I'm good.” I try to force a smile, but it's overshadowed by tears that I can't seem to get to stop coming.

Probably because I'm not good. I'm not even a little good. I haven't been good for weeks. And not just because of Sutton but also because of the man sitting beside me, studying me with soft eyes.

We still haven't discussed the kiss. It's been nearly two weeks and nothing. I've seen him almost every day since and yet, he's not said a single word about it, like he wants to pretend it never happened.

I don't know whether to be hurt or relieved. But not talking about things has never been what Remi and I do. At least, not until recently.

The thought saddens me more than I can say.

Remi leans forward, grabbing the remote off the ottoman before pausing the movie.

“Pen.” He gives me a look. One I cannot easily explain.

“Seriously.” I swipe the back of my hand across my damp cheek. “I'm fine. I just... Was this movie always this sad?” I snort out a laugh, but it does little to distract Remi from the sudden swell of emotion that seems to have worked its way to the surface.

“Yes, but I don't think that's your problem.”

I don't respond. In truth, I'm not sure I have the words.

He's right, of course. That isn't my problem. The movie is the same it's always been. It's me who's different. Me who hasn't been the same since Sutton walked out of my life. Me who hasn't been able to pick up the pieces since hurting Remi—the only person who's ever really, truly loved me. No matter how hard I've tried to pretend like we can go back, deep down I know we can't. Not when Sutton still weighs so heavily on my heart.

Has it really been nearly two months already? God, it still feels like yesterday. I swear, when I close my eyes, I can still see his smile, that half-cocked grin that always tugged at his mouth as he settled between my legs. The way my skin would burn beneath his touch. The way I'd smell him on my sheets long after he'd left.

I still haven't been able to let him go, no matter how hard I've tried.

And then here sits Remi, handsome as ever, with his green eyes and messy blond hair, looking at me like he would burn the world down for me if I asked him to. Who has loved me when no one else did. Who housed me when I had nowhere to go. Who held me when I needed comfort and made me laugh when I needed to get out of my own head. Who forgave me when I didn't deserve to be forgiven—or at least is trying to forgive me. My world has begun and ended with him since I was twelve years old, and yet, try as I might, I can't force myself to feel anything outside of familial love for him.

I would do anything for him. Fight for him. Steal for him. Even kill for him. But I can't make myself love him in a way that I don't.

I've tried.

For the last few weeks, that's all I've done. Tried to let go of Sutton. Tried to embrace Remi. But it all feels wrong somehow. Like my body and heart know the truth, even when my brain won't accept it. The kiss we shared a couple of weeks ago only solidified this fact.

"You can talk to me, Pen. You know that, right?" He tips his chin, which is clean-shaven for the first time in weeks. As much as I loved him with scruff, I love him more when hair doesn't shadow half of his face.

I nod slowly, not sure I do, in fact, know that I can actually talk to him.

Because while yes, things have gotten better between us—if you call avoiding conversations and pretending things didn't happen better, but they still aren't anywhere where they used to be. And I can't pretend they are either.

"It's nothing. I think maybe it's just getting close to that time of the month." I try to brush off my overly emotional behavior.

“I’ve seen you at that time of the month, Pen. And this isn’t it. Talk to me.” Remi nudges my foot again.

“I can’t,” I finally admit.

His eyebrows knit together. “Is it about the kiss?”

A nervous pit opens up in my stomach. I knew we’d have to talk about it. We should talk about it. So why does the thought of talking about it make me feel like I’m seconds away from losing my dinner?

“Yes and no,” I finally answer, even though that actually is a large part of it.

“It’s about Sutton?” The name catches on his tongue.

I forget sometimes that I’m not the only one who lost Sutton that day. Remi lost him, too. I’m honestly not sure he’ll ever forgive his brother for what we did, but I pray one day he will be able to. It kills me knowing I’m the one who caused the rift. And for what? A few weeks of good sex? It obviously wasn’t anything else to him. If it were, why hasn’t he fought for me?

Then again, it’s not like I’m over here fighting for him either.

“Not exactly.” I shake my head.

“It’s about me?”

I nod, words I desperately need to say catching in my throat. Because no matter how badly I know they need to be said, I’m terrified to let them spill out.

“Just say what you need to say, Pen. We’ve been skirting around this for weeks. Maybe it’s time we just rip off the Band-Aid.”

I know he’s right. I know the only way to rebuild is to do so on stable ground and right now, the ground beneath us is anything but stable. Everywhere I turn, there are cracks and divots threatening to swallow us whole if we make one wrong move.

Remi was so desperate to have me and I was so desperate not to lose him that we overlooked what got us to this point in the first place.

“Do you really think you’re in love with me?” I bite down on my bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

If my question surprises him, he doesn’t let it show. Instead, he thinks on my words for a long moment before finally replying.

“What made you ask that question?” he asks calmly, slowly.

“I just feel like... I mean, if you were, wouldn’t you have made your move long before Sutton?” I don’t miss the way he cringes hearing *his* name

come from *my* mouth. “I know what you said, but I don’t fully believe the whole waiting until I was ready part. You’ve never been patient a day in your life and you expect me to believe you’ve waited for me for over a decade?” I shake my head vehemently. “When you... When you kissed me... Did you feel something?”

“Of course I did.” He’s quick to answer.

“Did you feel something in here?” I flatten my palm against my chest.

“Did you?”

“Don’t avoid the question by turning it on me. Why did you kiss me?”

“Because you told me to.” His brow furrows.

“I told you that you could, not that you had to.”

“Is there a difference?”

“There is.”

“Why did you kiss me back?” he asks instead.

“You’re not answering my question, Rem. Look at me and tell me that you’re in love with me. Now that the dust has settled and Sutton is gone, do you really look at your future and see us together in that way? Do you imagine marrying me one day? Having kids with me?”

“You don’t want kids,” he interjects.

“That’s not the point. When you imagine your future, what do you see?”

“You.”

“But what about me?”

“Everything.” His calm mask slips, giving me a small glimpse of the panic building behind his eyes.

“Remi, I know I hurt you and that I lied to you and that it will take time to get past what I did. But I feel like we can’t do that, not with this hanging over our heads. So, I’ll ask again, are you really in love with me? Or do you just not want Sutton to have me?”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive. I can love you *and* not want Sutton to have you.”

“You can.” I steel my nerves, forcing myself to keep going. The door is open now. All I have to do is step through it. “But that doesn’t mean you have to.”

“I love you.” He scoots toward me, his hands finding mine in an instant.

“And I love you. More than I will ever love another human being on this earth. But loving each other doesn’t mean we have to be *in love* with each other.”

“What if I don’t know?” The vulnerability in his voice damn near topples me. “What if I don’t know which way I love you, only that I do?”

“When you look at me, what do you feel?” I coax him on.

“Warmth. Love. Happiness.”

“Do you crave me?”

“What?” He draws back either because he’s uncomfortable or because he’s confused by what I’m asking. I’m not sure which.

“Do you crave me? Do you long to touch me? To kiss me? To fuck me?” I pause for a brief moment. “Do you see yourself only ever sleeping with me for the rest of your life? Am I worth that much to you?”

“You’re worth everything,” he insists. “Are you saying this because you aren’t in love with me?”

“You know I’m not.” I deliver the blow as gently as possible. “I’ve tried to imagine that life, and while I have no doubt I could be happy, I don’t think either of us would be satisfied.”

“When I saw him here...” He swallows hard. “All I could think was that he had taken what was mine. I felt a possessiveness like I’ve never felt. I thought that... I thought I...” He drops his face, letting out a slow exhale. “I thought that the way I felt about you, the way I’ve always felt about you, I thought maybe it meant...”

“Maybe it meant that your love was something more.” I finish his sentence for him.

He nods slowly. “I’ve always wondered, you know. Always felt like we were more. Like one day we would be more. But then I kissed you... And while I was right about one thing—you are an excellent kisser.” His mouth quirks in a half smile. “I just don’t know if I felt it, as you said, in here.” He touches his free hand to his chest. “I just want you to be mine, Pen. Always.”

“I am yours, Remington Jonathan Barnett.” I tangle our fingers together. “I’ve always been yours. You are my best friend. My family. Nothing and no one could ever replace you. If you hear nothing else I say tonight, hear that.”

“I love you, even after everything. I love you. You still know that, right?”

“I love you.”

“But you love him, too.”

My heart sinks somewhere into my stomach because I know, in this moment, there’s no way I could possibly lie to him.

“I do.” I draw my bottom lip between my teeth to keep it, once again, from trembling.

“Why?” The question doesn’t hold the anger it did the first time he asked it all those weeks ago. This time, he really just seems genuinely curious.

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

I take a deep breath, choosing my words carefully.

“I can’t explain it, not really. I just feel drawn to him. From the first moment I saw him, I don’t know, it was like suddenly it wasn’t gravity holding me to the earth, it was him. I know it doesn’t make any sense. I’m not sure I understand it myself, truthfully.”

“Does he make you happy?”

“He did, for a time.”

“Until I messed everything up for you.”

“No. You didn’t do anything. We did. I should have been honest with you from the very beginning.”

“I didn’t make it easy for you. Making you promise never to be with him.” He shakes his head. “That wasn’t fair of me. You should have been able to choose who you want in your life, even if that person is Sutton.”

“You knew he would hurt me.”

“I did.”

“I should have listened to you.” Even as I say the words, I know I would never take back the time I spent with Sutton. Despite the gaping hole he left behind, I would do it all over again if given the chance. I guess that’s how you know it was real.

“Sutton is only capable of loving one person—himself.”

“I know.” I don’t realize a fresh batch of tears has brewed behind my eyes until I feel one snake down my cheek.

Remi lifts his free hand, swiping it away with the pad of his thumb.

“He doesn’t deserve your tears.”

“Who says I’m crying for him?”

“I’ve left you alone in this.” He untangles our fingers before slipping his arm around my shoulder, tucking me into his side.

The feeling of him pressed against me, warm and strong, removes the last brick of the wall that we built between each other, and suddenly, it’s just us again. Just Aspen and Remi.

The emotion I’ve been holding back, the devastation that’s buried itself so deep it feels like a part of my very being, finally loosens its grip, and when it does, there’s no stopping the onslaught of tears that follows.

Remi doesn't say a word. He simply holds me, letting me cry. After weeks of fighting to hold it all in, once I start, it's hard to stop, so I just let them flow. I let every ounce of emotion I've kept bottled inside pour out, let it seep from my pores, cleansing me.

I don't know how long we remain like that. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. All I know is that when I finally lift my head and look at him, when I meet those familiar green eyes swimming with their own form of grief, I feel more myself than I have in months.

Remi is my home. He always has been. It's like I've spent the last two months wandering the streets, braving the elements, trying to find a safe place to rest my head. And in one act of selflessness, Remi has opened the door and ushered me back inside.

I'm home...

"You know"—Remi leans in, resting his forehead against mine—"you could have at least slept with me once before deciding you didn't want to be with me. I would've rocked your world."

And there it is, that cocky grin and that filthy mouth I've missed so much.

When I pull back, giving him a playful shove, I'm met with a smile that could melt ice in even the coldest of temperatures.

"That didn't take you long." I snort, fighting my own smile.

"Seriously, though, Pen." He reaches forward, twisting a lock of my hair around his finger, his eyes locked on the movement for a long moment.

"We're okay, right?"

"More than okay." I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull him in for a tight hug, burying my face in the crook of his neck. "I love you, Remi," I speak against his warm skin.

"I love you, too." He squeezes me so tightly it's almost difficult to breathe, but I don't care. I relish the feeling. In the knowledge that even though I may have lost Sutton, at least I didn't lose Remi.

At the end of the day, that's more important than anything else.

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Chapter Three

Sutton



“Sutton.”

I glance up at the sound of my name, surprised to see Olivia slip into the barstool next to me seconds later.

Her presence instantly irritates me. Can't this woman take a fucking hint? She's been calling me continuously for days and even though I haven't returned a single phone call, she's continued to call anyway.

I don't even want to know how she tracked me down.

Then again, this bar has become somewhat of a second home of mine over the past couple of months. I guess if she was really trying to find me, it wouldn't be that fucking hard.

“What the fuck do you want?” I ask, barely glancing in her direction before lifting the glass of Scotch to my lips.

“You've been avoiding me.”

I tense when her hand settles on my thigh, cursing when her nails dig into my flesh through the material of my suit pants before she gives a hard tug, forcing my stool to swivel toward her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I brush off her grip, not trying to mask my irritated expression.

“You won't talk to me willingly, so I'm making you,” she says pointedly.

I take a moment to study her.

It feels like it's been years since I've seen her, but in reality, it's only been a few short months. Though the last thing I would call the last few months is short. Time seems to have slowed down to a crawl, each day more miserable than the last.

She looks good. I mean, she looks like Olivia. Well, other than the fact that her hair is about half the length that it used to be, hanging just past her shoulders rather than halfway down her back.

I smirk, remembering all the times she said she was going to cut it and I told her not to because I liked wrapping it around my hand when I was fucking her from behind.

“Nice haircut.” I tip my chin toward her hair.

“I thought you’d like it,” she quips, not missing a beat.

“Please, do tell what is so important that you had to so rudely interrupt my evening.” I take another long pull of Scotch, reveling in the burn as it slides down my throat.

“Can we go somewhere more private?” She glances around the crowded bar.

“I thought I made it pretty clear that your days of riding my cock are over.”

I’m an asshole. I know. But I’m also not in the fucking mood right now, so whatever gets her off my nuts is what I’m going to say.

“Screw you, Sutton,” she hisses, crossing one leg over, making herself comfortable. *Fuck.* “I wouldn’t fuck you again if you were the last man on this earth.”

“No?” I quirk a brow. “Then why the fuck are you here?” I lift the glass to my lips, dumping the warm amber liquid onto my tongue.

“Remi asked me to check on you.”

I sputter, damn near shooting Scotch out of my nose before forcing it down the right way.

“Remi?” I croak, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“He’s worried about you.”

“He’s worried about me?” I let out a humorless laugh. “That’s rich, considering the last time I saw him he was trying to bash my fucking face in.”

“You slept with Aspen. What did you expect?”

The mention of her name has my fingers tightening around the glass in my hand so hard that I’m honestly surprised it doesn’t shatter.

And while it’s true, I’m the one who left and I’m also the one who refused to answer her when she called or texted, she’s the one who left me first, when she chased after my brother. She made her choice. I’ve made mine. No woman is worth the headache or the heartache. Not even her.

But even as I think it, I know that isn’t true.

She’s the only woman who’s ever been worth it, but I’m too fucking proud to admit that to anyone, especially her. Not with the way we left things.

“Forgive me, but remind me again when you and my brother became so chummy? Was it before or after you started fucking him?” I set the near empty glass on the bar.

Depending on how the rest of this conversation goes, I may not be wanting to hold on to anything that can be thrown across the room. The last thing I need is to pelt some poor fucker in the head and spend the rest of my night sleeping it off in a jail cell.

“You know, jealousy doesn’t look good on you.”

“Jealous.” I snort. “You want my brother, he’s all yours. You couldn’t make me jealous if you tried.” I lean back, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“I wasn’t talking about me.” She narrows her gaze at me.

“My patience is wearing thin, Olivia. If you have a fucking point, I suggest you make it.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to be here any more than you want me here. But since I’m the only person your brother knows in Chicago, outside of yourself, he’s asked for my help. And unlike you, I actually *care* about him.”

“And what are you helping him with, exactly?”

“He wants to know if you’re wallowing in self-pity or have resumed fucking your way through Chicago.”

“And why, do tell, does he care?”

“Because he needs to know if it was real for you.”

“If what was real?” I shift uncomfortably.

“Your feelings for Aspen. Based on the look of you, I’d say I have my answer.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I reach for my glass, downing the remaining Scotch in one large gulp before slamming it back down onto the bar. “And the fact that you think you do is fucking laughable.” I move to stand, but she shoves me back down by the shoulder, showing surprising strength for her petite figure.

“Now you listen to me, you stubborn asshole. You may be willing to let the only real thing you’ve ever had with someone go for selfish pride, but you aren’t the only one suffering right now.”

“She doesn’t love me. She loves my brother.” I try not to let the sting of my own words show on my face.

“She can love both of you.”

“I don’t care who she loves. I fucked her because I could, and now it’s done. Simple as that.” I spew the lie so easily, if Olivia didn’t know me as well as she does, she might actually believe me.

“Then why are you sitting here drinking your weight in Scotch?” She shoves my glass away when I prepare to ask for another. “You love her too, and that terrifies you.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because Remi is my friend, and so is Aspen... Kind of.”

“Well, I think maybe your wires got crossed because my brother fucking hates me. Sorry you wasted your time.”

“He doesn’t hate you. Though if you ask me, maybe he should. But he is angry with you. Very angry. Lucky for you, he loves Aspen more than he dislikes you right now. And she misses you, Sutton.”

“Well, that’s too fucking bad because I don’t miss her.” I push to a stand and this time she doesn’t try to stop me.

“If you don’t do something soon, it’ll be too late,” she warns.

I dig some cash out of my wallet and drop it onto the bar before facing Olivia once more.

“It’s already too late.” With that, I spin and exit the bar without so much as a backward glance.



Thump. Thump. Thump.

The sound seems to vibrate through the walls around me, stirring me from sleep.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I groan, rolling to my back as I force my eyes open.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I glance at the clock on my bedside table.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I push myself upright, ready to fucking murder the poor soul who thought it was a good fucking idea to beat down my door at seven in the morning on a goddamn Saturday.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I release a silent curse as I tug on my pants and stumble from my bedroom, my head still heavy with sleep.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“What the fuck!?” I groan loudly. “I’m coming.” I click the lock, tugging open the door without checking who’s on the other side, not really sure I care that fucking much. I’m prepared to kill whoever the fuck it is regardless.

At least, that’s what I think, until I see the last person I expected to find standing outside my door—my brother.

He looks so different than he did just a few short weeks ago—aged—weighed down as if the weight of the entire world rests solely on his shoulders. And I guess maybe it does—his world anyway. Guilt swims in my stomach. I know without a single thought that every line of stress on his face, every touch of grief behind his eyes, every ounce of anger that tugs at his features, is my fault, and my fault alone.

“Remi,” I sputter in confusion.

I try to move past my surprise, but my groggy brain is working slowly this morning. Too slow. No doubt compliments of the entire bottle of Scotch I drank last night, in my own living room, might I add. I haven’t been back to Merida’s since Olivia tracked me down there last week, not wanting to risk being cornered again.

“You look like shit.” He steps over the threshold, his gaze going around the room.

“Hello to you too, Brother.” I kick the door shut, refraining from returning the sentiment that he also doesn’t look the greatest, as I turn to follow him farther into the open space.

“What the hell happened in here?” He gestures around at the empty liquor bottles, half-eaten food containers, and other bits of just random filth that litter my living room and kitchen, which are open to one another.

“I had a party,” I lie, stepping past him into the kitchen to get some water, my throat like sandpaper when I speak. “Now, why don’t you stop fucking judging me and tell me why the hell you’re here? Because let’s be honest, we both know you didn’t just happen to find yourself in Chicago and decided you wanted to catch up with your big brother.”

“I had to see it for myself.”

“See what?” I grab a glass out of the cabinet, quickly filling it with water from the sink before taking a long drink. I feel instant relief.

“Olivia told me you looked miserable, but sometimes you just have to see things with your own eyes to be sure.” He turns his back to me, walking toward the wall of windows that overlooks the north side of Chicago. “When I found you that day, at Aspen’s apartment, I was so sure I understood. Turns out, even I can be wrong sometimes.”

“Are we speaking in riddles, little brother? Because I’m not following.” I hesitantly step up next to him, careful to keep a few feet of space between us in case he decides to start throwing more punches.

“You love her,” he states simply.

“So do you.” I don’t bother lying. What good would it do me anyway? I do love her. How could I not?

“She loves you.” He keeps his gaze out the window, his shoulders tight. I watch his jaw tick slightly, recognize the anguish he’s in by being here, and again, I can’t help but wonder why he is.

“She clearly loves you more.” I match his stance, not able to look at him any longer, not able to stomach the guilt I feel knowing how badly I hurt my brother.

Looking out at the view of the city, I take a deep inhale through my nose.

Remi and I have never been close, not in the way brothers should be, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love him. I’ve been shit at showing it, but expressing my emotions has never been my strong suit. At least, not until Aspen. Not that I properly expressed how I felt to her either, but she pulled it out of me, even if she didn’t realize it.

“She doesn’t love me the same way.” Remi’s voice breaks at the end, like it physically pains him to say the words out loud.

I reluctantly turn my gaze back to him when I feel his eyes on the side of my face.

“And what way is that?”

“The way *she* loves *you*.” He shifts his weight, angling his body toward me. “I can see how sad she is, even when she tries to hide it. Even when she tries to plaster on a smile and act like everything is okay, I can see it in her eyes, what she tries so hard to hide from me. She misses you. I hate it. I hate it with everything that I am. But I also know I can’t stop it either. So, I’ve made a choice.”

“And what choice is that?” I pivot on my heel so that we’re now both facing each other.

“She is my whole world, Sut. She always has been. And I won’t lose her.”

“You aren’t going to lose her. You two have been thick as thieves since you were kids. And I know I fucked up, Rem. I fucked up in a big way. But my actions do not define your relationship with Aspen.” Her name catches in my throat as it slides up.

“It wasn’t just your actions. She was a willing participant, too. And without even realizing what she’d done, she broke us in a way that can’t be undone. We could never be together now, even if she wanted that, too. Because when I see her now, I see you too, and I just don’t know how I could ever move past it. So, this isn’t just for her, it’s for me too. I’d rather have her as my best friend than not have her at all.”

“And have you talked about this with her? How does she feel about it?”

“I told her what she wanted to hear. She knows there’s no going back.”

“You lied to her.” I can read his words as if they were written all over his face. “Like you’ve been lying to her all these years. And please tell me, Brother, what good have lies done for any of us thus far?”

“I didn’t lie, so much as I conceded. She doesn’t feel that way about me and I realized that if I didn’t step aside, I was going to lose her. I told her what she needed to hear because that’s what it took to keep her. But even doing that, even giving her what I knew she wanted but wouldn’t say, a way out, there’s still something missing, like she’s walking around missing a part of herself. It took me longer than it should to admit to myself that the missing part is you.” His eyes swim with unshared emotion.

I always knew my brother was too good for this world, and I was right. I wish I were more like him. I always have.

“I can’t...” I start, unable to finish my thought before he cuts me off.

“Do you love her? I mean truly love her?”

“Rem...”

“Do you?” he repeats more forcefully.

“You know I do.” I blow out a heavy breath, the admission settling in the space between us.

“Then go to her.”

“She doesn’t want me.”

“She does. She just thinks she can’t have you because of me.”

“You’re telling me you would be okay if Aspen and I were together? You could watch us and not resent every moment we share?”

“I’m not saying it will be easy in the beginning, but yes, I think I could eventually find a way to be okay with it, if not even happy for the two of you.”

“I’ll only end up hurting her, and then we’ll be even worse off than we started.”

“Then don’t hurt her.”

“You say that like that’s so easy for me. You know me, Rem. You know I fuck up every single thing I touch. Just look at you. You’re my brother, for fuck’s sake, and look at what I’ve put you through. Do you really think I’m the kind of man who deserves someone like her?”

“No. But what I think doesn’t matter. She loves you. And I can see you love her. I’ve never known you to love anyone but yourself. So, I’d say that’s a good fucking start.”

“I’m not capable of giving her what she needs. I’ll get bored eventually, and then what? Then all of this was for nothing. Seems maybe I should just save us all the fucking pain and accept the inevitability of what’s to come.”

“That’s just fear talking. She’s changed you. Even I can see it standing here now, looking at you. And I understand it better than anyone else because I understand what it is to love her. I don’t think you’re afraid that it won’t work. I think you’re afraid that it will.”

“And what makes you so sure of that?” My tone lacks the agitation I want it to possess.

“Have you slept with anyone since that night?”

His question catches me a bit off guard.

“What?”

“Have you slept with anyone since Aspen? It’s a simple question, Sutton.”

“No.” I glance down at the floor for a brief moment, feeling oddly embarrassed to admit it out loud.

Don’t get me wrong, I thought about it. I thought about losing myself in some random woman, letting her make me forget. Only I couldn’t. Because I knew no matter how warm the bed or how good the company, Aspen was not someone I could just simply forget, no matter how hard I tried.

“That’s how I know. Because you, dear brother, have never been anything short of selfish. Yet, even though you haven’t seen or spoken to her in weeks, you still refrained from sleeping with anyone else. I’ve never

known you to abstain from anything a day in your life, and yet, here you are. That tells me all I need to know.”

“You can’t expect me to just swoop in and take her away from you.”

Sadness tugs at his expression, plunging a knife straight through my ribs.

“You already have.” His next words twist the knife further, stealing the breath from my lungs.

“Remi...” I take a step forward, but the look in his eyes warns me against moving any closer. “I can’t do it. I won’t. I hurt you enough as it is. I won’t continue to hurt you.”

“You’re hurting me no matter what you do. The damage is done. The least you can do is make it worth something.”

“And what about you? You’re just going to stand by and what, watch me love the woman you’ve loved half your life? How would you ever find a way to be okay with that?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand. You’ve never understood the connection Aspen and I share. It goes beyond love and friendship. She is like a very part of me. If she is happy, I can find a way to be happy, too. That’s what it means to love someone more than you love yourself. Maybe someday, you’ll understand what that feels like.”

I already do. I think but don’t say. Because Remi is right. Aspen has changed me. She’s changed me in ways I’m still discovering every single day.

It didn’t happen like I imagined it would. When I thought about falling in love, I always pictured it as something that happens slowly over time, not something that hits you so hard and fast that you don’t realize you’ve fallen until you’re so far gone there’s no going back.

I thought maybe the reason I had never fallen in love with someone was because I wasn’t cut out to love another person that wholly. Turns out, I was just waiting for her.

“And what if you’re wrong? What if she doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore?” I voice my fear aloud.

Remi didn’t see what I saw that night. The way she looked at me. The things she said. “*You’ve always been second to him. If you didn’t know that already, then you’ve been lying to yourself.*”

I think she was pretty clear on where she stood.

“I’m not wrong. I’ve never seen her like this before. I’ve witnessed her struggle more than any person should. I’ve watched her fight her way through

things no normal person could endure. And yet, I've never seen her broken. Not until now."

"I don't know how to do this," I admit, feeling more vulnerable than if I slit myself open and my insides spilled to the floor.

"Who does? But if I know you, I'd say you'll figure it out." He turns abruptly, heading back across the room. "Whatever you do"—he glances back at me as he reaches the door—"do it soon. She may be willing to wait for you forever, but that doesn't mean you should make her."

With that, he opens the door and steps into the hallway. Before I can form a single word, I hear the click of the latch, and just like that, he's gone.

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Chapter Four

Aspen



“Hey.” I look up at the sound of Remi’s voice, relief loosening the tension in my shoulders when I see him leaning against the doorframe of my office, his messy locks standing on all ends as if he’s been running his fingers through his hair all day. “Where have you been? I’ve been trying to get a hold of you all day.”

“Sorry, I was stuck in meetings all day today.” He brushes me off with an easy explanation, and yet, something in his expression doesn’t sit right with me. “Why are you still here?” He gestures around my office.

“Just finishing up some last-minute stuff for a case,” I lie, closing the last remaining windows open on my computer before starting to gather my things. In truth, the only real reason I’m here well past eight o’clock is because work is one of the only things I find comfort in these days. Probably because it’s the only thing I feel like I have any control over. “How did you get inside anyway?” I finally think to ask.

“Carl let me in.”

“Carl is going to find himself fired if he doesn’t stop letting people into the office after hours.” I snort. While a super nice guy, I don’t think my bosses would take lightly to the janitor letting anyone in at this hour, even Remi.

“I’m not just any old riffraff off the street. Carl and I go way back.”

“Is that so?” I bark out a laugh.

“It is,” he confirms with a nod. “You about ready, then? I’m starving.” One side of his mouth tips up in a half smile.

Things with Remi and I have definitely been moving in the right direction as of late, but I know we still have a long way to go to undo the damage I did. It’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that it’s been weeks, or well, months actually, since everything went to shit. Almost three months, to be

exact. And yet, to my heart, it still feels like yesterday. And while Remi and I *are* slowly finding our way again, we haven't talked about anything that happened since the night we decided friends are all we would ever be. It's like he just erased it off the board and is happy to pretend it never existed in the first place. In truth, so am I. Nothing good ever came from beating a dead horse. Not that I'd actually ever beat a horse, dead or alive, but you understand my reference. What's done is done, and all we can do is move on.

"Is this your way of asking me to dinner, then?" I open my desk drawer, grabbing my purse before pushing it closed again.

"Would you rather go home and eat microwave mac and cheese or peanut butter and jelly?"

"It's disturbing that you know exactly what I have in my pantry right now." I snort, standing to push in my chair before crossing around my desk to join him in the doorway.

He steps to the side, allowing me to pass before following me down the hallway. We pass Carl on the way out the door, who fist bumps Remi with a wide grin on his aged face.

"See, best buds." Remi waits until we're outside to say, nudging my shoulder with his.

"Do I want to know what you did to make my office janitor like you so much?" I quirk a brow, allowing Remi to slip his arm through mine.

"I'm just a likable dude, Pen. What can I say?"

"Uh-huh." I roll my eyes, falling into step beside Remi. "So, where are you taking me to eat?"

"You'll see." He keeps his gaze forward as he leads me down the sidewalk and around the corner, heading in the direction of my apartment.

There are plenty of restaurants along the way, so I'm not surprised he's taking me to one on the way rather than out of the way, considering how late it already is. That is, until he continues to pass every single one of them.

"Uh, Rem." I glance up at the side of his face when my apartment building comes into view, knowing there's nothing beyond it but more residential buildings for the next few blocks other than a donut shop that has long since closed and the little deli on the corner, which is also closed. Everything is on the way to my apartment, not past it, which only furthers my confusion. "Where are we going?" I ask again.

"There's something I need to talk to you about, Pen." Remi slows at the crosswalk for a brief moment before tugging me across the street.

“Okay,” I finally say when he doesn’t continue right away.

“I need you to promise you won’t be upset with me.” He pulls to a stop in front of my apartment building, releasing my arm as he turns to face me.

“Why would I be upset with you?” Nerves flutter through my belly.

“Remi, what’s going on?”

He looks past me for a brief moment before his eyes once again find mine, an emotion I can’t quite place swimming behind their green depths.

“I went to see Sutton a couple of weeks ago,” he admits on a quick breath, physically bracing himself as if that will somehow protect him from my reaction.

It takes a long moment for his words to settle over me, and once they do, I’m flooded with a different kind of nerves. Dread settles deep in my gut and I try to prepare myself for what comes after his unexpected confession.

“I see you, you know,” he continues before I can even think to form words. “I see how sad you are and how hard you’re trying to hide it from me. It kills me that you feel like you have to hide from me, Pen.” He tips my chin up, forcing my gaze to meet his when I attempt to look away. “You miss him.”

Tears instantly prick the backs of my eyes.

I have no idea where this is going but deep down, I know it can’t be good. I thought we were rebuilding. I thought things were getting better. Maybe I was just kidding myself. Maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see.

“Remi…”

“Just let me get this out, okay?” He’s quick to interrupt.

I nod because really, what else can I do?

“You miss him. It’s not a question. And I already know you love him. You’ve admitted as much. What I hadn’t considered until very recently is that he loves you too.” I expect to see anger on his face, betrayal even, but there isn’t a trace of anything of the sort in his expression. All I see staring back at me is pure, unconditional love, and I realize in this moment, just how much I’ve taken for granted where Remi is concerned.

“He doesn’t,” I croak.

“He does.” Again, he doesn’t let me get more than a couple of words out. “I went to see him because I had to see it for myself. I had to know that you meant more to him than just sex. And do you know what I found?” He continues without giving me a chance to answer. “I found my brother, a man

who has only ever cared for himself, broken and grieving in a way I didn't know he could grieve."

My tears boil to the surface, the first one streaking down my cheek within seconds.

The thought of Sutton hurting, it's like taking an ax to my chest and twisting it violently. Because no matter what has transpired between us, I still love him. I've always loved him. Though I must admit, I didn't know it was possible for *me* to hurt *him*.

"He loves you, Pen. And you love him. Who am I to stand in the way of that?"

"What are you saying?" My words catch in my throat.

"I'm saying you two should be together."

"You don't mean that." I swipe at another tear that streaks down my cheek.

"I really do." A sad smile tugs at his mouth. "I love you, Aspen. You are my best friend. My family. And there isn't a single thing in this world I wouldn't do for you. I've been selfish and angry and jealous, and I've let that fuel my actions. But I never stopped to consider what this was doing to you. Not right away anyway. I was so consumed with having you to myself that I was willing to let you suffer. To let you both suffer."

Movement behind me catches my attention and I quickly glance over my shoulder, the world seeming to tip on its axis when my eyes lock with a very familiar pair of sky-blue ones.

"Sutton." His name is off my lips before I can stop it.

My heart is beating so hard and fast it feels on the verge of pounding its way straight from my chest cavity. I don't give myself a chance to really look at him. I can't. I can't do anything until Remi gives me the answers I so desperately need. Like why is he doing this and how could he ever be okay with this.

I flick my eyes back to Remi, who slides his hands across my damp cheeks, cupping my face.

"You are my best friend no matter who you love. Even if that person is Sutton. I don't know what the future holds any more than you do. I don't know if this is something that will last forever or if it will blow up in a dramatic fashion. All I know is I can't be the reason you don't find out for yourself. Because even if you choose me, one day you will resent me for this

and if this situation has taught me anything, it's that I can't live with distance between us."

"I don't know what you're asking of me."

"I'm not asking anything. I'm telling you. I want you to be with Sutton, if that's what you want. I want you to explore your feelings for him to the fullest. I want you to be happy."

"And what about you?" My chin quivers.

"I need to find my own way, too."

Panic grips tightly in my chest, stealing the air straight from my lungs.

"Remi..."

"I'm not saying I won't be here. I'm just saying that I think we need to learn to lean on other people, too."

"What if I don't want to?" I argue, trying to ignore the steel gaze I feel pinned on the side of my face, the one calling to me like a silent whisper, begging me to look at him.

"You're scared. I am too. But we can't let fear control our lives." He drops his forehead to mine the way he's done countless times before. "This is what you want, Pen. You know it and so do I. And I don't love you any less because of it." He drops a soft kiss to the tip of my nose before stepping away. I miss the warmth of his hands the instant they leave my face.

"If you hurt her..." He turns to his brother, whom I still can't bring myself to look at again.

"I have that solid right hook of yours to look forward to, I know." Humor dances behind Sutton's words, but there's a seriousness to his tone just the same.

My gaze lands on the side of Remi's face as he and Sutton exchange a silent nod of understanding. And then before I know it, I'm watching his back as he walks away, leaving me with a growing pressure in my stomach that feels a lot like regret.

"Aspen." Sutton's deep voice fills my ears, coaxing my eyes to him.

I don't want to look, and yet, at the same time, I've never wanted anything more in my life. Because isn't this what I've been dreaming of for the past three months? Isn't this everything I wanted? But if that's true, then why do I feel so... sad?

"Look at me."

I finally do. I give in and let my gaze lift to his, and trust me when I say, I'm not prepared for what I see when I get my first real look at him. My

breath hitches as I take in his appearance. His facial scruff has grown to a beard, well-manicured and short, but a beard, nonetheless. It looks so good on him I nearly moan at the sight. Couple that with his dark locks pushed haphazardly away from his face and the hesitant look in his piercing blue eyes, and it's a wonder I'm able to hold myself upright.

"If you came because Remi asked you to, I'm sorry you wasted the trip." It's a petty thing to say, but then again, petty is what I feel. Now that the shock of seeing him is starting to wane, I remember how easily he left.

The unanswered texts. The unreturned calls. Even after imploding my relationship with Remi, I still wanted him. I still do. But no matter what he told his brother, I don't know if I'd believe it. If you love someone, you don't just drop them at the first sign of trouble. But that's exactly what he did. He abandoned me. Left me here to weather the storm alone.

"Can we go inside and talk?" He shifts his weight like he's physically uncomfortable. "Please," he quickly adds, looking at me in a way that causes my skin to prickle, little goose bumps peppering across my flesh in an instant.

"Okay," I concede after a long moment of silence stretches between us.

I don't want him to come up. I don't want to even look at him. Because looking at him reminds me of all the hurt and betrayal that stemmed from what we did. And then I think of Remi. Of the way he looked at me before he walked away and once again, I'm flooded with an uneasiness I can't easily ignore.

I move past Sutton, purposely holding my breath as I do. I don't want to smell him. I don't even want to look at him. How can I? How can I do this to Remi? To myself? Why is he even here? What does he really hope to accomplish?

These are the things that consume my thoughts as I make my way up the stairs toward my apartment. I try to ignore the feeling of Sutton following so closely behind. Try to push away the excitement his presence stirs inside of me, no matter how hard I try to ignore it.

But the feeling only intensifies tenfold when we step inside my apartment, the door sealing us into the too-small space.

I drop my things on the breakfast bar, flipping on a couple of lights as I move farther into the room.

"You can look at me, you know?"

I shift abruptly, realizing that Sutton has remained just inside the door, like he's unsure how to proceed. Guess I'm not alone in my discomfort.

“Why don’t you just say what you came here to say, Sutton?” My tone lacks the agitation I was going for, instead breaking at the end.

“You’re angry with me.” It’s not a question.

“Of course I am.” I cross my arms in front of my chest, as if that will somehow shield me from his stare.

“I only did what you told me to do.” His brow furrows. “You told me to leave. In fact, you made your stance on the matter pretty fucking clear.” He tries to hide the hurt from his eyes, but I can see it as plain as day.

I had never stopped to consider that what I said to him had actually hurt him. Not truly. Wounded his pride a little, maybe. But hurt him... I didn’t know it was possible to hurt a man like Sutton Barnett. But looking at him now, I see that’s exactly what I did.

It was so easy to blame him for leaving, but he’s right, I was the one who practically shoved him out the door.

“I was devastated. How did you expect me to respond? My best friend just ran out of my apartment practically in tears and we were the ones who did it to him. So yeah, I took it out on you. I didn’t realize your ego was quite so fragile.” I sneer, letting anger take the reins, because if I don’t, I’ll be in a puddle at his feet in seconds.

He’s not the only prideful one among us.

“Remi told me this is how you would respond. That you would cling to your anger like a protective blanket.”

I blanch at the accusation.

How dare he...

“But you can insult me and belittle me all you want. I’m not going anywhere, Coop.” The use of his nickname for me fractures some of my resolve, and something in my expression must tell him so because he chances a step farther into the room. “You’re right, you bruised my ego, sure. But that wasn’t all it was. I don’t know when it happened, but somewhere along the way, I fell in love with you. I never let myself admit it because I knew you’d never truly be mine. And when you chose him, when you left me here to go after him, it confirmed every fear I had. That you’d never love me the way you love him.”

My chin quivers for what feels like the hundredth time in the span of fifteen minutes, as my body fights not to succumb to the emotion threatening to swallow it whole.

“You’re right. I will never love you the way I love Remi.” The way his expression falls damn near guts me clean. I quickly move to explain.

“Because I do not love him the same way I love you.”

His features stiffen, as if my words have frozen him in place. He stares back at me, eyes glazed, shoulders taut, and then suddenly, a wide grin breaks across his face, seeming to warm the room to the temperature of the sun. Sweat beads instantly at the nape of my neck.

“So you do love me, then.” He’s in front of me in two long strides.

“Would you be here if you thought I didn’t?” I say instead of saying what I really want to say, which is that I’ve loved him since the first moment I saw him and that I’m pretty sure I’ll never be able to stop, no matter what he does to me.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” he admits, his hands twitching at his sides, like he wants to reach for me but he’s not sure if he should just yet.

“Why did Remi go see you in Chicago?” I resist giving in to the building tension between us. I’ve made the mistake of diving into the ocean that is Sutton Barnett without a life vest. I can’t be so reckless with my heart again.

“He said you were sad, but you were trying to hide it from him. He said you missed me, that you loved me. He wanted to know if I felt the same.”

“And what did you say?”

“I’m here, aren’t I? What do you think I said?”

“Tell me.”

“I didn’t have to say anything. He knew it the instant he walked into my house. I’ve worn the loss of you like a beacon. Everyone could see it. All they had to do was look.”

“I still don’t understand. Why would he go see you and not talk to me first?” I ignore my raging heart, ignore the way my body tilts toward him ever so slightly, like it simply can’t wait to be closer to him.

“Because he knew if he asked you outright, you’d put on a brave face and act like everything was okay. He wants you to be happy, Coop. He thinks I can make you happy.”

“And what do you think?” My breath catches in my throat when he closes the last remaining distance between us, the heat of his body engulfing mine in an instant as he steps into me.

“I think he’s right. I think I could make you happy if you’d let me.” I tense when his fingers close around my forearm. “Will you let me, Aspen?”

“You act as if it’s so simple. Like we can just pick up and move on like nothing happened. I can’t...” I have trouble holding his gaze. “I can’t do that to Remi. Not when I know us being together hurts him.”

“Seeing you in pain hurts him more. He did this. He’s the one bringing us back together. Don’t use him as an excuse. If you don’t want to be with me, have the balls to say it outright.”

“I don’t have balls.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware of what you have.” In one swift motion, his arm is around my back and he tugs my body flush with his. “I’ve spent the last three months dreaming of just that.” He slides his nose against mine, the action making me feel dizzy with lightheadedness.

“Tell me again,” I whisper, his lips so close to mine I can practically already taste him on my tongue.

I never stood a chance of fighting him off. Even if he had shown up here without Remi’s support, I would have eventually given in. Because at the end of the day, my heart and my body know where they belong... Right here, with Sutton.

“Tell you what, Coop?” He slides his nose along mine again, his lips teasing the corner of my mouth.

“Tell me that you love me.” I pull back so that I can look him directly in the eyes.

He doesn’t flinch away from my stare. Instead, he looks me straight in the face and says for the second time, something I honestly never in a million years thought I’d hear spill from his lips.

“I love you.”

And just like that, the tether holding me in place snaps. I fall into his arms in an instant, his mouth swallowing the half sob that works its way from my throat. And then I’m lost. Lost to his kiss. Lost to the sensation of his touch. Lost to the deep ache in my stomach as my body reacquaints itself with the feeling of him.

His fingers slide across the small of my back, up my spine, across my shoulders, down my collarbone like he too is remembering.

I choose not to listen to the small voice in the back of my head telling me this is too fast. That there’s still so much to be settled. But my greedy body and stingy heart won’t hear a word of it. Because they want this. I want this.

I’ve spent months without feeling this rush, this intensity, this spark that only he can light up inside of me. And I didn’t realize how dark everything

was without it until this very moment.

I barely register that my feet have left the ground before Sutton is moving, his lips never leaving mine, almost like he's afraid to stop kissing me. Like he's afraid if he does, I'll simply vanish from his arms. I know the feeling all too well because I too fear the same thing as I hold on to him for dear life.

His lips continue to move along mine, his tongue tasting every inch of my mouth as he deposits me on top of my unmade bed. As he takes his time peeling the clothes from my body—thank you button-down blouse. As he frees himself from the confines of his jeans. And as he sinks deep inside of me in one heavy motion.

Only then do our lips part. Only then does he pull back just enough to watch the pleasure slide across my face, to watch me quite literally come undone beneath him. He holds my gaze the entire time, moving in and out of me with skilled precision.

It doesn't take long for the intensity building in my stomach to mount, and when I quickly fall over the edge, I take him right down with me, his eyes never once leaving mine as we tumble into the abyss.



I peel one eye open and then the other, the remnant sleep still heavy on my brain as I blink at the empty space in the bed beside me. The space where *he* should be.

Was any of it real?

Did I simply dream the whole thing?

But just as the thought crosses my mind, I'm hit with the scent of him. Like it's seeped into my very pores, I can smell him everywhere. And when I roll to my side, I can feel the evidence of our incredible night together. The delicious soreness between my thighs is a stark reminder of how we rolled in the sheets for hours, unable to keep our hands off each other. Every time we'd fall apart in each other's arms, I'd swear there was no way we could keep going, but then he'd touch me and my body would instantly want more.

I smile at the memory.

Sutton Barnett has always been my drug of choice, and last night he took me higher than I've ever been before. I still feel drunk with lust as I force myself into an upright position. My body itches to find him so that he can satisfy the intense hunger that acts as my guiding force as it propels me out of bed.

I throw on an oversized T-shirt, quickly locating my panties on the floor. I step into them, nearly falling over in my haste to get them on. I'm still trying to get them situated as I head out into the living room in search of Sutton. I expect to find him in the kitchen, attempting to cook something he'll no doubt burn. Or maybe just preparing some much-needed coffee for us both. But what I find instead is an empty apartment.

Unease blooms in my chest, but before it can fully take hold, my front door swings open and Sutton appears, a brown paper bag in one hand, a drink carrier in the other.

He startles, having clearly not expected me to be out of bed yet, but his expression quickly smooths into an easy smile.

"Hey." He kicks the door closed with his foot, then turns to set the bag and drinks on the breakfast bar where my purse still sits from the night before.

"Hey." I make my way toward him. "Where did you go?" I ask, even though the evidence is right in front of me. The donut shop down the street.

"Well, I was hoping to surprise you with breakfast in bed, but it seems you've foiled my plans." He pulls something out of the brown bag before turning, presenting me with quite possibly the biggest Danish I've ever seen. "I hope you're hungry."

"Ravished." I lean forward, dragging my teeth along the sweet pastry before tearing off a bite, leaving my lips dripping with glaze.

His eyes instantly darken.

Feeding off his reaction, I make a show of licking my lips once I've forced the too-big bite of pastry down.

"Delicious." I guide the Danish toward him. He doesn't hesitate to lean forward and take a taste himself.

"Wow." He smiles around a mouthful.

"Told ya." I lean past him and grab a drink from the carrier.

"I didn't know what to get. I know you like regular coffee, but I wanted to get you something different. Hopefully, it's not terrible."

I lift up the cup and read the scribbled words on the side.

“Actually, caramel macchiatos are one of my favorites.”

“Seriously?” He grins, clearly pleased with himself.

“Yep.” I take a tentative sip, moaning when the sweet, warm liquid hits my tongue.

He visibly tenses and I slowly lower the cup, giving him a knowing smile.

I know there are a million things we need to talk about and work out, but right now I can't help but think about how badly I want him inside of me again.

His thoughts seem to mirror my own and within a short moment, both the pastry and latte have been abandoned.

Let's just say, my couch didn't know what hit it... And as we reemerge a few short minutes later, drinking lattes and eating Danishes half-naked and damp with sweat, I'm struck by how happy I feel in this moment.

“I have to leave in an hour,” he abruptly announces, effectively popping my bubble with one quick pinprick.

“What? Why?” My shoulders visibly sag in disappointment.

I don't want to be disappointed. I don't want to already be so lost in this man that after a few short hours, the thought of him leaving makes it hard for me to breathe, but that's exactly how I feel. Like the very air from my lungs has been stolen.

“I have some things I need to finalize with work and stuff. Trust me, if I could stay”—his hand settles on my leg that's draped across his lap—“I would.”

“I understand.” It's all I can think to say.

“It shouldn't be long. Two weeks at most.”

“And then what?”

“Then, I don't know.”

“What do you mean, you don't know?”

“The lease on my condo is up soon, and I haven't secured another project yet. I've been... preoccupied.” He gives me a look that tells me I should know why. “And since I passed on the job here after everything that happened...” he trails off. “I don't know.”

“So you don't have anything else lined up?”

“Not yet. Though, I can afford to take a few weeks off, so it's not like I'm under a lot of pressure to just accept what I can get. I would at least like to have some options before my lease is up.”

“Will you look in D.C. again? Or are you planning on considering all offers?” I ask, even though I’m almost afraid to hear the answer.

It’s been one day. Hell, not even a day. More like a few hours. I can’t expect him to pack up his whole life and just move here. I’m not even sure I want him to. Not yet anyway. Not until I can find some stable footing with Remi after all of this.

My stomach twists uncomfortably at the thought of him. Of my best friend. The man who has proven he will do quite literally anything to make me happy.

What is he doing right now?

Is he sad? Mad? Hurt? Is he sitting at home wondering what Sutton and I are doing?

Then again, that’s probably the last thing he wants to think about.

I hate that it has to be this way.

No matter what happens, someone I love gets hurt.

“I’m not set one way or the other. I’ve put out a few feelers, so it really just depends on what’s available.”

I know what he’s doing. He’s trying not to get my hopes up. Because he recognizes how up in the air our situation is right now, the same as me. And while I wish he would tell me what I want to hear, I respect the fact that he doesn’t want to give me false hope.

“What time is your flight?” I ask, taking another drink of macchiato to keep my lips from continuing to move.

“Two.”

I glance over my shoulder at the clock hanging on the wall, dread pooling in my stomach as I realize it’s already eleven and that in just an hour’s time, I will be forced to say goodbye to him all over again, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.

There’s so much left to figure out and yet, deep down I know we could talk ourselves to death and still not have any real clear heading on where this is going. Something tells me this is something I’m just going to have to let develop naturally no matter how badly I may want to rush into it at full speed.

“So are we...” I hesitate, not really sure how to ask or what exactly I’m asking for that matter.

“Together?” He reads the direction of my thoughts perfectly.

“Yeah.” I shift, heat flooding my cheeks, though why I feel embarrassed, I’m not entirely sure.

“I’ve never been with anyone like this before, so you’ll forgive me if I’m not really sure what to say. But I want this, Coop. I want all of it. I’m all in.”

He reaches for my hand, wrapping his fingers around mine.

“Me too.”

“Good, because I sure as fuck wasn’t planning on letting you go a second time.” He lifts my hand, kissing the back of my knuckles before pulling me onto his lap. I go willingly, shifting to straddle his waist.

My fingers instantly find the back of his hair and I revel in the way the silky strands feel beneath my touch.

“Now, we have about an hour left before I have to head to the airport. So tell me, Coop, how would you like to spend the next sixty minutes?”

I grind down onto his lap, giving him a knowing smile.

“Oh, I can think of few things.” I hum, pressing my lips to his once more.

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Chapter Five

Aspen



“Hey, Remi, it’s me.” I blow out a slow breath, wishing he would have just answered. It’s been three days since he and Sutton ambushed me and while there’s a huge hole in my heart that suddenly feels so full it might burst, none of it feels right without Remi.

“I’m at work.” I snort out a small laugh. “Of course, you already know that because, duh, I’m sure the phone number told you as much.” God, why am I so nervous? This is Remi we’re talking about. And while yes, I am technically with Sutton now, that wouldn’t be the case had he not pushed me into it.

“Anyway, can you call me, please? I’d really like to hear your voice.” I hesitate before dropping the receiver onto the base.

“Hey.”

I glance up to see Laura stop in the doorway of my office.

“Hey.” I straighten. “I feel like it’s been forever since I’ve seen you. Where have you been? Based on your tan, I’d guess somewhere really warm. Don’t tell me... Mexico.”

“Fiji.” She grins, clutching a manila folder to her chest.

“Fiji.” I nod. “I bet that was incredible. I can’t remember the last time I took a real vacation.”

“Didn’t you just go to Ohio a few months back?”

Her question hits me like a blast of cold air to the face, damn near stealing my breath. God, has it really only been months? It feels like a lifetime ago, considering everything that’s happened since then.

“I wouldn’t exactly call that a vacation.” I relax back in my chair.

“Anyway, did you need something?” I gesture to the folder she’s holding.

“Actually, yes.” She enters my office fully. “I’m having a hell of a time getting a potential witness to speak to me. Charles thought you might be able

to help.” I lean forward to take the file when she extends it to me.

“Let me guess...” I flip open the file, fingering through the contents without finishing my thought. I find exactly what I expect—a picture of a young man, early twenties, decent enough looking. “So, Charles thought maybe I could charm him into cooperation?” I hitch a brow. “Didn’t realize that was part of my job description.”

“Actually, it’s more about *where* the client lives rather than *who* he is.”

I check the file again, this time paying closer attention to the details. When I land on a particularly interesting part, I glance back up at Laura, her tanned skin making the gray at her temples stand out more than usual.

“He lives in Ohio?” I give her a questioning look.

“He relocated there last month. We’ve tried reaching him through all the normal channels, but he’s proving rather difficult. Charles thought maybe since you were already familiar with the area, you could fly out there and meet with him directly. I believe he said he’s quite close to your hometown, if I’m not mistaken.”

Quite close indeed, as in just a couple of towns over. Though in my case, that’s not a good thing.

“And when is he expecting I do this, exactly?” I swallow hard, anxiousness already pinging through my extremities.

I’m not opposed to traveling for work. In fact, in most situations, I’d probably be happy to. That is, if I were traveling anywhere else. And while yes, Sutton is a lot of the reason why I avoided the area like it carried a life-ending plague, after my unfortunate run-in with Harris the last time I was in town, I have other obvious reasons for not wanting to go.

“If you agree, he’s asked me to book you a flight for next week.”

“I can’t do next week.” I shake my head. “I have something personal scheduled that I can’t get out of.”

It’s not untrue. I do actually have a prior commitment. I just choose not to tell her that said prior commitment is a Halloween party Remi invited me to or that it’s this weekend and not next. Though it’s still unclear if he actually wants me to go or not, but that’s beside the point.

“I’m sure we can push it a week if needed, but considering it is a bit of a pressing matter, I don’t think he’d agree to pushing it out further.” She shifts, clearly uncomfortable with being the one who has to handle this.

“Why is Charles not here to tell me this himself?” I voice my thoughts aloud.

“Because he left for New York this morning. He won’t be back for at least a week or two. He didn’t tell you?”

“No, he most certainly did not.” I gaze back down at the file, the wheels turning at rapid speed. “And you said *if* I agree. Does that mean I have a choice in the matter?”

“Not really. I mean, not unless you don’t care about your job.” She grimaces apologetically.

“And how long am I expected to be in Ohio? Did he say?” I try to keep the irritation from my voice—don’t shoot the messenger and all—but a tiny bit still seeps through.

“However long it takes to track down Max Evans and secure a meeting with him. If you’re lucky, you’ll only be gone a day or two.”

“And if I’m not lucky?” I mutter, because let’s be real, right now I’m feeling anything but lucky. Honestly, of all the freaking places in the world and the one person I need to meet with has to live so close to where I spent the worst years of my life—sans Remi, of course. My one shining light in an otherwise dark tunnel of horrible memories.

“Charles said not to come back until you’ve met with him. Apparently, he’s a make or break on this case.”

“And if he refuses to meet with me as he’s refused to take your calls or answer your emails, then what? I’m just supposed to live in a hotel for the next six months?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just telling you what I was told.”

“I know.” I blow out a hard breath, snapping the folder shut. “Since I guess I don’t have a choice in the matter, go ahead and book the flight. But not for next week, for the week after. If Charles has a problem with that, he can contact me directly.”

“Thank you.” She shifts toward the door but stops herself mid-motion. “You seem... better, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Huh?” Her statement doesn’t register right away.

“Before I left, you, um... Well, you didn’t seem quite like yourself.”

As if I needed her reminder that my life has currently been in shambles. Though, her words don’t bother me nearly as much today as they would have a few days ago. Now, if Remi just called me back, then maybe, just maybe, I would feel like I have some semblance of control over my life again.

“I wasn’t, and I am better, thank you.”

“Sorry about all of this.” She gestures at nothing in particular.

“Not your fault.”

She hesitates at the door a moment longer before stepping into the hallway. I listen to her heels click against the tiled floor as she walks away.

Fucking great... I scrub my hands down my face, jumping when my cell buzzes to life on my desk, causing my pulse to spike. Fumbling with the device, I flip it over to see Remi’s name flashing across the screen. An instant flood of relief soothes my frayed nerves.

“Remi.” I’m quick to answer.

“Hi, Pen.”

“Hey.” I smile at the sound of his voice.

“What time do you get off work?”

“After the day I’ve had, I plan on leaving soon. Why?”

“Wanna meet me for a drink?”

“I’d love to.” I’m already closing out windows on my computer and collecting my things before he even says where.

“I’m right next to your office actually. At O’Hara.”

“Let me guess, you ordered stuffed mushrooms?” I bite my bottom lip to keep my smile from spreading further.

“No, but I plan to as soon as you get your ass over here and join me.”

“I’m on my way.” I push away from my desk and quickly exit my office and head toward Laura’s. “Hey.” I peek my head in, keeping the phone pressed to my ear. Her gaze meets mine over the open screen of her laptop. “I’m going to head out for the day. If you get the flight arrangements confirmed, would you mind texting me the details?”

“I will.” She nods. “I’m actually doing it now. Any preference on where you fly into?”

“Columbus or Cincinnati is fine.”

“And hotel accommodations?”

“Can we hold off on those for the moment? I’d like to look around and see what’s available close to the airport.”

“The airport?” I hear Remi in my ear, but I keep my focus on Laura.

“Is that close to where you’ll be going?”

“Not really, but I’d rather stay close to the city.” At least if I’m in Cincinnati, or even Columbus, I won’t have to worry about running into a certain drug-crazed rapist who would likely kill me if he saw me again, given what Sutton did to him during our last interaction.

I can't imagine he'd let me get away unscathed this time, considering I will be alone and not have Remi or Sutton there to wipe the floor with him, which they both are more than capable of doing.

And while seeing Harris again was as traumatic of a situation as they come, watching Sutton manhandle him the way he did was more satisfying than I expected.

"Okay. I'll send you the details later."

"Thank you." I turn and head toward the lobby, refocusing my attention on Remi. "Sorry about that. Walking out now."

"You going somewhere for work?" he asks, having obviously heard one half of my conversation with Laura.

"Home," I say, even though Ohio is not my home anymore. Hell, I'm not sure if it ever was. Remi, he's my home.

"Wait, you're going to Ohio?" He doesn't attempt to hide the surprise in his voice. He doesn't have to either. I'm rather surprised I agreed to it myself. Then again, considering I could potentially lose my job if I don't go...

"There's a client there who's dodging our attempts to reach him. Charles thought it was a good idea to send me since I'm familiar with the area."

"Sounds to me like he just didn't want to have to deal with it himself."

"That's exactly what it is. Then again, doing what *he* doesn't want to *do* is kind of in my job description." I turn the corner, spotting the canopy that marks the entrance to O'Hara.

"And are you okay with that?" Concern laces his voice. "Traveling alone, I mean. You're not a great flyer either."

"Guess I'm going to have to learn to be." I tug open the wood-framed glass door before stepping inside the dimly lit restaurant. "I'm here. Where are you?"

"Right here."

I look to my left when I hear him in person and on the phone simultaneously. Ending the call, I drop the device into my bag before turning to fully face him.

"Hey." I force a smile, suddenly more nervous than I expected to be standing in front of him again.

"Hey." He reaches out, closing his fingers around mine as he turns toward the host—a younger man dressed in all black. "I'll take that table now."

"Of course, sir." He nods, collecting two menus before leading us to a table toward the back of the dining room.

“I forgot how nice this place is,” I say to fill the space, sliding into my seat the instant we reach the table.

“If I remember right, the last time we came here, you worried it was *too* fancy.” The corner of his mouth twitches upward.

“I still think that.”

“But the mushrooms.” He gives a dramatic chef’s kiss to the tips of his fingers.

“I’m never going to hear the end of these mushrooms, am I?”

“No,” he states flatly before his lips tip into a full smile.

My God, how I’ve missed that smile. Has it really only been three days? I guess when you’re worried you’ve lost someone forever, three days can feel like an eternity.

“I’m sorry I haven’t called.” His smile slips as he seems to read the direction of my thoughts perfectly.

“It’s okay. I know this isn’t easy... For any of us. But especially for you.”

“I’ll admit, the idea of you two together is going to take some getting used to, but as long as he makes you happy.”

“He does.” I’m quick to answer. “Though, I have no idea where it’s all going to lead,” I admit, feeling sorry that I’m not more certain of things.

“That’s half the fun.” He pauses when the waitress approaches. “I’ll take a Jameson on the rocks. Pen?” Both sets of eyes come to me.

“Vodka martini, no garnish.” I wait until the waitress leaves before once again giving Remi my full attention. “Sorry, you were saying?” I coax him to continue.

“Nothing really, just that if you’re happy, then I’m happy for you. The rest will figure itself out. So long as my brother knows that I’m your number one.” He grins.

“Always,” I promise.

“Then that’s good enough for me.”

“I’m sorry about all of this, Rem. Had I just been upfront from the very beginning...”

“Don’t.” He interrupts. “I don’t want to do this anymore, Pen. I don’t want to keep opening this wound over and over again. I just want to move on. I want to sit here and enjoy the evening with my best friend. Can we do that?”

I nod, realizing that as much as there is to say, that’s all I really want too.

“We can do that,” I agree.

“Now, tell me more about this work trip.”

“I don’t have many details yet. Only that he’s important to a case and has thus far been very elusive.”

“And he lives where?”

“Not twenty miles from Wilmington, Perkinsville.”

“How random. What are the odds that the one person your firm can’t get to cooperate lives two towns over from where we grew up?”

“Agreed.” I shrug. “It would be my luck.”

“Well, I know one thing for certain. There’s not a chance in hell I’m letting you go alone.”

“Remi.” I shake my head slowly. “You’re not going with me.”

“Like hell I’m not.”

“I’ll be okay,” I promise, despite not knowing how true that statement is. I mean physically, I’ll be fine. Emotionally, well, that’s another story.

“I know you will. Doesn’t mean I’m not going.”

“Rem... I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m telling. Besides, my boss has been riding my ass about using my PTO before the end of the year. This will give me an excuse.”

“You don’t want to save it for the holidays?”

“Pen, I’ve got enough to take three full weeks off. I think I’ll be good. Besides, it’s a use it or lose it situation, so really, you’d be doing me a favor.”

“Is that so?” I can’t fight the smile that tugs at my features.

“It is.” He leans back in his chair, matter of fact in his stance. “You tell me once you have your flight details and I will book a ticket. I’ll make sure I’m on the same plane. Then, after you’ve gotten Mr. Elusive to talk, we can milk our time there and spend some time together on the company’s dollar. It’s the least they can do.”

Have I said recently how much I love this man? Because God, I really do.

“You’ve got it all planned out, do ya?”

“I do. So, what do you say? Party of two?”

“Party of two,” I agree, knowing I couldn’t stop him even if I wanted to, which for the record, I don’t want to. In fact, this just went from something that filled with me dread to something I’m actually looking forward to—a chance to spend some real time with Remi. I think he knows as much as I do how badly we need it.

“Now, you know, we will have to visit my parents while we’re there. My mother might murder us both if she finds out we were so close and didn’t

come visit.”

“Of course.” Normally, I’d be excited to see Summer and Randel, but given everything that’s happened, I won’t lie and say the idea of facing them doesn’t make me a little nervous. “Do they know? About me and Sutton, I mean?” I hate to ask, but I feel like I need to prepare myself either way.

“They do. No details or anything, just that you two are *involved*.”

“Are they upset with me?”

“Of course they aren’t.” He looks at me like I’ve grown ten heads. “I don’t think there’s a single thing you could do to upset my parents. I’m pretty convinced they think you walk on water.”

“I highly doubt that.” I snort, nodding when our waitress reappears, setting our drinks on the table.

“We’ll just need another minute,” Remi tells her, taking a small sip of his drink before turning back to me. “Now, on to more pressing matters. What, do tell, are you wearing to my Halloween party Saturday?”

“You still want me to go?”

My question seems to surprise him.

“Of course I do. I need my wingman.”

“Wing *woman*,” I correct him.

“Tomato, tomat-o.” He shrugs.

“Completely different things.” I bark out a laugh.

“Whatever,” he grumbles with a dramatic eye roll. “Are you still going with me or not?”

“I am.”

“And what are you dressing up as?”

“I have no idea.”

“Pen, it’s the day after tomorrow. Halloween is next week. You’ll never find a good costume now.”

“I’m sure I will come up with something,” I promise, feeling lighter in this moment than I have in months.

And no matter what it takes, I’m going to hold onto this with everything that I am.

“Something sexy.” He raises his eyebrows suggestively at me.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and find out,” I tease, even though I really don’t have a single freaking clue.

I’ve had more important things on my mind than a Halloween costume, especially because I didn’t think I’d have a need for one.

“It better be sexy.” His smirk is still fully in place when the waitress reappears a second time to take our orders, even though neither of us has even opened a menu.



“I want to suck your blood.” I glance up at Remi’s horrific Dracula impression to see him step out of his bedroom dressed in a full vampire costume, complete with pointed teeth and blood dripping down his chin. “Well, what do you think?” He holds his cape wide.

“You definitely look like a vampire. Not exactly the kind of vampire I envisioned when you said you were dressing up as a vampire, though.” I drop my feet from the ottoman, shifting myself into a fully upright position.

“What were you thinking I meant? A blue jacket and sparkly skin?” I shrug with a smile.

“Edward Cullen is a disgrace to the vampire kind.” He flutters his cape over his chest, pulling his arm up to cover his mouth as he waves his free hand in my direction. “I compel you to forget about any vampire that sparkles in the sun rather than bursts into flames.” He narrows his gaze, really playing the part well.

“I forget about any vampire that sparkles in the sun.” I rise as if being placed in a trance, my voice almost robotic. “Except Edward Cullen,” I quickly add with a giggle.

“Rats.” He drops his arms back to his sides. “Worth a shot.” He grins wide, finally noticing the costume I’m wearing.

When I got to his apartment a few minutes ago, he was still in the shower, so like I always do, I simply came in and made myself comfortable. Which means he hasn’t yet seen my outfit, and given that I didn’t know what I was going to be until today, he had no idea how I was going to look when I showed up here tonight. Trying to find something that’s both appropriate for a work Halloween party and still cute just a few days before Halloween is harder than you might think.

“For the love of Christ, Pen. Are you trying to kill me?” He raises a fist to his mouth, biting around his knuckles, which looks rather comical because he

has to angle his hand so as not to risk knocking out one of his fangs. “I knew you were going to go sexy.”

“You like it then?” I do a little swirl, really accenting the slit in the dress, which sparkles with gold.

“I love it.” He nods appreciatively, his eyes doing another sweep over my body. “But what are you exactly?” He snorts out a laugh at my overemphasized pout.

“I’m the sun goddess.” I gesture to the gold spiky crown sitting on top of my head. “Duh.” My hands drop to my hips.

“Damn. I don’t know how I didn’t guess that.” He rolls his eyes sarcastically. “A sun goddess. Of course. Because that’s something we see every day.”

“You know what, you try to find something both appropriate for a work environment and that doesn’t make you look like you’re wearing a trash bag the weekend before Halloween. I’d like to see what you come up with, Dracula.” I move my whole body with the word. “Quite possibly the most unoriginal costume in the world.” I feel the need to point out, playfully of course.

“Ouch.” He flattens his palm over his heart. “You wound me, Pen. Truly, you wound me.” His acting job is almost as bad as his costume and I bark out a laugh in spite of myself.

Things with Remi feel like they’re trending in the right direction, but it’s only been a couple of days, so I’m trying not to get too far ahead of myself.

He’s trying to be okay with everything. And honestly, so am I.

I have to remind myself that it’s not like I sought Sutton out. It’s not like I went after him. No, when given the choice, I chose Remi. And I’d do it again if I had to. I just hope I never have to. Because being with Sutton is something I can’t easily explain with words. Like he completes me somehow. And yes, I get how little sense that actually makes. But I guess it’s true what they say—when you know, you know. And with Sutton, I know. Hell, I’ve always known.

But with that comes the other side, the side Remi is currently standing on. It’s like walking a tight rope without a safety net. If I lean too far to one side, if I step wrong, there will be nothing at the bottom to catch me when I fall. And while Remi is the one who brought Sutton back to me—though why, I’m not sure I’ll ever truly understand—that doesn’t mean one day he won’t

change his mind and decide that he'd rather not be in my life than watch me love his brother. Because I do—love his brother, I mean. With all that I am.

Sutton and I have talked every single day since he returned to Chicago. I knew he had left a void when I lost him. I just didn't realize how large that void had been until now. He's the last person I talk to at night and the first person I hear from in the morning and that void that once felt like an endless pit is now so full that it's overflowing. It's crazy how quickly things can change. It's almost like the last couple of months didn't happen with how easily we just fell back into how things were before. But they did happen. The proof of that is all around, staring me right in the face.

The proof is Remi, and the damage I did to our relationship. A relationship that has been my whole world for half of my life—and now, I'm not sure we'll ever be the way we used to be, not completely anyway.

I know these past couple of months have been hard on him. Finding out that I had been secretly seeing his brother behind his back. The whole, I'm in love with you fiasco, and then me admitting I didn't feel the same. And even though he backpedaled a bit later on, I still feel like he meant what he said about loving me—at least on some level. Because I feel that too. It's confusing to love someone as deeply as Remi and I love each other and not confuse those feelings for something more. Or maybe they are something more. They're just not something that's enough. At least not for me.

“You'll survive, I think,” I respond after a long beat. “Now, are we fixing to get out of here? Didn't you say the party started at six?”

“What time is it?”

“Twenty after.”

“Perfect. That means we will be fashionably late. And I do mean fashionable.” He raises his eyebrows up and down as he gestures to himself.

“Self-assured as always,” I jokingly grumble. “But seriously, are you about ready? I didn't eat because you said they were catering in food and I feel like I'm withering away here.”

“You don't look like you are.”

I draw back, heat rushing to my cheeks.

His smile falters when he realizes he's said the wrong thing.

“Wow.” I can't help the hurt expression that crosses my face. Remi has never so much as implied I'm anything but perfect just the way I am. To say that his comment comes from left field—I mean, way left field.

“Shit, Pen. I didn’t mean it like that.” He’s in front of me in an instant. “I just meant, you look good. Healthy.”

“You mean I look fat,” I state flatly. Clearly, the lessons I’ve taught him over the years about things you do and do not say to women have suddenly left his brain.

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’ve never been fat a day in your life. And even if you were, I’d still think you were the most beautiful creature to ever walk the earth.” He gives me a soft smile. “I just... for a while there you got too skinny. Honestly, I was worried if you were even eating. But now, you look fuller, healthier, and that’s a good thing, Pen.”

“Don’t ever tell a woman she looks fuller.” I give him a pointed look, crossing my arms in front of myself.

“I’m sorry. You look beautiful. Radiant. Magnificent.”

“Keep going.” My lip twitches as I fight off a smile.

I know Remi didn’t mean anything by the comment but for someone who, growing up, was constantly made to feel ashamed about every aspect of herself—including the way she looks. I’m a little sensitive in that department.

“Flawless. Picturesque. Exquisite,” he rambles off. “How am I doing?”

“Not bad.” I gently kick my foot into his. “Can we go now? My full ass is not full at all, but very hungry.” I crinkle my nose.

“You’re not going to let me live that one down, are you?”

“Not a chance,” I admit with a smile, giving him a hard time. “I’m just kidding.” I nudge his arm with mine. “Come on. There’s a difference between being fashionably late and just plain late.”

Nodding, he slips on his shoes, grabbing his cell and keys before following me to the door.



“Hello.” I press my phone to my ear, struggling to support Remi’s weight as I press him against the brick wall of some random office building.

I wasn’t planning on answering it, as I’m currently trying to get Remi home, but considering it keeps ringing, I worried it might be important.

“Hey.” The sound of Sutton’s voice brings an instant smile to my lips. “You weren’t answering my calls. I was starting to get worried.”

“Sorry, I was at a Halloween party with Remi and well, he got pretty wasted and now I’m trying to get him home.” I catch Remi by the shoulder as he slouches forward. “Rem.” I get right up in his face. “I need you to stand, yeah?”

“You’re pretty,” Remi slurs, pushing a tendril of hair out of my face.

“Where are you?” Sutton’s voice rings with agitation but honestly, I’ve got my hands full enough with one Barnett brother to be worrying about the other right now. Especially since I’ve got a pretty good buzz of my own going on.

“A couple blocks from my apartment. I think I’m just going to take him there because I have no idea what he did with his keys.”

“A couple blocks in which direction?” His breathing increases, like he’s suddenly picked up speed.

“Um, I don’t know. I’m directionally challenged. West maybe... Why does it matter?”

“Because I’m coming to find you.”

I swear the ground beneath my feet moves.

“You’re here?” I press my hand firmly against Remi’s shoulder when he starts to slouch forward again.

“Uh-oh.” Remi laughs. “We’re in trouble.”

“If I’m leaving your apartment building, which way do I turn?” he asks, answering without actually answering.

“Um... left.”

“Okay, and then?”

“Go to the first—no, second. Go to the second street and turn right.”

“Okay.”

“We’re one street over next to...” I look up at the brick building I’m currently struggling to keep Remi upright against. “Rich Printing. It’s a two-story brick building.”

“I see you.”

“Wait, what?” I sway again, having no idea how he found us so quickly. Unless...

I look up to see him sprinting down the sidewalk, barely glancing to see if any cars are coming before he darts across the street toward us.

“Sutton!” Remi opens his arms wide. “Sutty, sutty, sut, sut, sut.” He chimes out like a song, practically collapsing into his brother’s arms when he reaches us.

I don't have time to think about how good it is to see him or how good he looks—damn, he looks so good—before he's hoisting Remi up, supporting his weight with an arm wrapped around his back. I quickly move around him to help from his other side. I realize I'm not that much help, but I did get him this far on my own.

"Sutton, you're a handsome fucker, you know that?" Remi's head bobs up and down as he speaks, unable to hold it upright for any real length of time.

"How far away was this party?" Sutton asks, presumably me, though he doesn't look at me, or Remi for that matter, keeping his face forward and his eyes on where he's walking.

"A few blocks." I groan when Remi leans to my side, pressing the majority of his weight onto me.

"A few blocks?" Sutton is quick to shift Remi back toward him. "How the hell did you get him that far all by yourself?"

"I'm stronger than I look." I shrug beneath Remi's arm that's draped across my shoulders.

"She's so strong," Remi slurs in agreement.

"You should have called an Uber," Sutton scolds.

"Why? I was making it just fine."

"Because what if someone came across you two? A petite woman and drunk man who can barely hold his own goddamned head up. You would have been easy targets."

In truth, I hadn't really thought about that. Though I've always felt quite capable of taking care of myself.

"We were fine and we would have continued to be fine," I disagree. "But thank you. I won't deny I'm not relieved not to have to carry him the rest of the way on my own."

"I don't know how you carried him any of the way. He weighs a fucking ton."

"You weigh a fucking ton." Remi's head lulls to one side as he drifts seemingly in and out of consciousness.

"Sheer willpower." I smile, though he doesn't glance my way to see it. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I wanted to surprise you. When we spoke earlier, you didn't mention you were going to a party."

“Didn’t I?” I try to play it off like it just slipped my mind when in truth, I purposely didn’t tell him. I don’t know why I didn’t. I guess I’m just not really sure how to balance myself between the two of them.

Which is also why I haven’t yet mentioned the work trip that Remi will be accompanying me on. Obviously, I know I have to. I just wanted to have everything confirmed. I don’t know the rules here. I mean, normally, I can’t imagine a guy being okay with his girlfriend—though it’s weird to think of myself that way—staying in a hotel room with another guy. But when the other guy is Remi and we’ve always shared a room, it has to be okay, right?

“You most certainly did not,” Sutton clips. “Otherwise, I would have told you that I was flying in for the weekend.”

“You’re here for the weekend?” The excitement in my voice finally pulls his gaze my way for a very brief moment and I see a flutter of a smile touch his lips.

“Yippee...” Remi sounds as if he’s not even aware he’s speaking at this point.

“Come on, Brother.” Sutton hoists him upright when he starts to slouch. “Let’s get you home.”

“Take me to my house.” His words are barely audible.

“What’s that?” Sutton leans his head closer to Remi’s.

“Take me to my house,” he grumbles again. “I don’t want to listen to you fuck *my* girl.” The words run together and are nearly lost to the wind, but I can tell Sutton catches them, just as I do the same.

“Rem, I don’t know where your keys are.” I reason with him. “You have to stay at my house tonight.”

“I don’t want to go to your house,” he whines like an oversized child.

“Well, too fucking bad.” Sutton leads us across the street to my apartment building. “Because I am not carrying your ass any farther.”

“Carry my own ass.” Remi’s head falls forward again and this time, I feel a significant shift in his weight.

“Fuck,” Sutton grumbles, digging his fingers into Remi’s ribs. “Wake the fuck up.”

Remi’s head pops up abruptly.

“Ow.” His gaze cuts to his brother. “That fucking hurt.”

“Then stay the fuck awake. Otherwise, your ass is sleeping on the sidewalk.”

Remi doesn't say anything else, but he does manage to somewhat hold his head up as Sutton and I load him into the elevator and take him up to my floor. Sutton supports him while I fish my keys out of my bag and fumble with the lock, finally getting the damn thing to click open.

Once inside, we lead Remi to the couch. Sutton no more than gets his head onto a pillow and he's out cold, snoring within seconds.

Straightening, he looks down at his brother for a long moment.

"Dracula." He snorts. "Very original." He leans down, grabbing the blanket off the back of the couch before draping it across Remi.

Straightening, his eyes come to me, sweeping over me like he's just now seeing me for the first time.

"Sun goddess," I quickly say before he can ask, gesturing to my dress, though I'm sure I look ridiculous to him.

"You look beautiful." His expression softens.

"Thank you. And thanks for this." I gesture down to Remi's sleeping form. "I would have gotten him here, but likely not without injuring one or both of us."

I sway slightly, feeling a little off-balance. I'm just not sure if it's from the alcohol, exhaustion, or the sight of Sutton standing in my living room after what feels like way too damn long.

"Come here." He moves toward me at the same time that I move toward him. We meet in the middle in a clash of lips and hands, going from zero to a freaking million in less than a few seconds.

"Bedroom," I hiss against his lips, trying to hold in my groan as his tongue slides deliciously along mine.

I'm in his arms in an instant, my body taut with so much anticipation, I'm fairly certain I might come apart before we even make it to my room. Knowing Remi is sleeping on the couch is the only thing that keeps me from crying out when Sutton's hand slips up the back of my dress, his fingers grazing my underwear, which is already damp with need.

"Always so ready for me." He husks with satisfaction, nudging my door open just enough to step through it before turning to push it closed, clicking the lock.

"Always." I slide my hands along the back of his head, kissing him long and deep. "But we have to be quiet," I whisper into the darkness, talking more to myself than to Sutton. "I don't want to wake Remi up."

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.” He drops me on the bed abruptly, moving to rid me of the tight confines of my dress. “He sleeps like the dead after he’s been drinking.”

I jump when I feel his lips brush my collarbone.

“You, one the other hand, won’t be getting any sleep at all.” His lips find mine, his tongue slipping along the seam of my mouth.

“You won’t get any complaints from me.” I slide my arms around his neck, pulling him down on top of me so I can feel the full weight of him.

And he won’t either. Not a single freaking one...



“You’re up.” I smile at Remi from the kitchen when I see his head appear as he pushes upright on the couch. Grabbing a second coffee cup from the cabinet, I set it next to mine, quickly filling it. “How are you feeling?”

He groans uncomfortably, shifting to throw his legs over the couch.

“That good, huh?” I snort, grabbing both cups of coffee before carefully making my way into the living room.

“What happened last night?” He drops his head into his hands, massaging his eyes with his palms.

“Well, that is quite the story.” I set a cup next to him on the end table before taking a seat in the chair diagonal from him. Pulling my legs up underneath me, I settle in, lifting my own cup to my lips to blow on the hot liquid before taking a tentative sip. “Better question, how much do you remember?”

“I remember the party. Well, most of it, I think.” His head pops up, his gaze finding mine in an instant. “Did I grab your boob?”

I bark out a laugh.

“You did, in fact. Multiple times. Though in your defense, I don’t think it was intentional. You were kinda all over the place.”

“Fuck, Pen.” He scrubs his hands down his face before leaning into the back of the couch. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing you haven’t done before.” I grin, taking another sip of coffee. “I made you a cup,” I tell him when he eyes my drink, gesturing to the end table next to him.

“Thank you. I may need a minute before I drink it. I feel like my stomach is barely hanging on.”

“I wouldn’t know why.” I give him a knowing smirk.

“How did I get here?”

“I carried you most of the way.”

“And what about the rest of the way?” His brows furrow.

As if on cue, the door swings open and Sutton steps through, his hair still wet from the shower he took just before leaving. He’s dressed in black joggers and a gray hoodie, something you might find someone leaving the gym in, and damn if he doesn’t look like he’s wearing a million-dollar suit he looks so good.

Remi looks over his shoulder, a combination of surprise and irritation crossing his features.

“That’s how,” I tell him.

“When the fuck did you get here?” Remi asks his brother, who kicks the door closed with the side of his foot before setting a white paper bag in Remi’s lap.

“Just in time to carry your ass home. Plain bagel and cream cheese. I’d bet you need some bread on your stomach right about now.” He pauses, glancing down at Remi. “You’re welcome.” Sutton shifts, moving around the couch to take a seat on the arm of the chair I’m sitting in. “Cinnamon raisin bagel with cinnamon butter.” He leans down, kissing the side of my head before handing me a white paper bag as well.

I tense, having not expected such a display in front of Remi. And while it’s innocent enough, I just feel like it’s too soon. Last night was one thing given that Remi was out of his mind drunk. But today, today is a very different story.

“Fuck,” Remi grumbles, his thoughts on the matter seeming to mirror my own.

“Problem, Brother?” Sutton rests his own food bag on his leg as he looks at Remi with an arched brow.

“Do you have to do that in front of me?” He sneers, though it lacks any sort of real anger.

“You know we’re together now. Wouldn’t you rather we be transparent about it? Or do you secretly like it when we hide things from you?”

Anger pricks up my spine and I turn wide eyes on Sutton, seconds away from giving him a piece of my mind. We had such an amazing night and

morning, and here he goes ruining it in a very Sutton type of way.

“Good to see *some* things haven’t changed.” Remi smirks, the tension in the room dissipating before it ever really has a chance to develop. “Still a conceded ass thru and thru.”

“Did you expect anything less?”

Remi snorts out a laugh. “No, I suppose I didn’t.”

I look between the two men, confused as they both seem weirdly relaxed given the current situation we find ourselves in.

I have to resist the urge to ask what happened when Remi visited Sutton because this, the way they’re acting, it’s not at all what I had mentally prepared myself for. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad they seem to have reached some sort of understanding. I just wish someone would fill me in on it.

Then again, some things are just between brothers. I don’t even have a brother and I understand that much.

“Now that we’ve got that settled, if you ever take Aspen to a party again, you better be sober enough to make sure she gets home—not the other way around. Fuck knows where you would have woken up this morning had I not been here.”

“I was managing,” I interject, smacking the side of Sutton’s leg.

“Is that what you call what you were doing?” he challenges.

Crinkling my nose, I stick my tongue out at him—a polite way to say *fuck you*—before lifting my cup for another drink. Lord knows I need the caffeine this morning. Sutton wasn’t lying about not letting me sleep.

“Was I really that drunk?” Remi asks after a long moment, digging into the bag Sutton left on his lap. Pulling out the bagel, he doesn’t bother with the cream cheese as he tears a big bite off one side with his teeth.

“You were pretty bad,” I admit softly, not wanting to make him feel worse than he probably already does. “We made it about four blocks before you started to go out on me.”

“Fuck, Pen. I’m so sorry.” He shakes his head, his messy blond hair brushing across his forehead as he does. “Please tell me I’m still going to have a job on Monday.”

“I think you’ll be fine. You were loud and made quite the spectacle at times, but it was all in good fun. Even your boss was cracking up. I got you out of there once I noticed you were teetering.”

“You always take such good care of me.” He tears off another bite of bagel. “Thank you,” he speaks around a mouthful of food.

“It’s nothing you haven’t done for me.”

“You mean he’s had to carry you out of a party so blitzed you couldn’t even walk?” Sutton chimes in, seeming content to let the two of us have our moment until now.

“Oh, you have no idea.” Remi laughs, the sound deep and full in a way I feel like I haven’t heard in a long time.

I don’t know how everything shifted so quickly between our unlikely threesome, but Remi seems more himself right now than he has since before everything went sideways. Or maybe that’s just because he’s showing me what he thinks I need to see. I wish I knew for sure, but I wouldn’t put it past Remi to be devastated on the inside and smiling on the outside completely for my benefit.

“One time, she fell down half a flight of stairs, broke the heel of her shoe, tore her dress, and then ended up puking down my back when I was carrying her home over my shoulder because she was too drunk to put one foot in front of the other.”

“That was one time!” I object, ignoring the way Sutton’s gaze heats the side of my face.

“One time, my ass,” Remi barks. “What about that frat party when you thought it was a good idea to go swimming in ten-degree weather?”

“Stop.” I shake my head, knowing what comes next.

“What happened?” Sutton asks.

“She took off running full speed toward the pool, did a cannon ball, and landed with a thud on the pool cover. Messed her ankle up pretty good, too.”

“It was covered in snow. How was I to know?” I feel the blush spread warm and fast across my cheeks.

“You couldn’t tell?” I’m not sure if Sutton is more amused or concerned by my life choices.

“I was eighteen. It was the first time I had been truly drunk. Cut me some slack.”

“I will give you that.” Remi thankfully comes to my defense, even though he’s the one who thought it was a good idea to tell mortifying drunk stories about me—things I would have never told Sutton in a million years. “You did learn from your mistakes.”

“Thank you.” I move to set my coffee cup next to his on the end table.

“But then there was that one time—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” I cut him off with a stern look.

“What? I’m sure Sutton has suffered his fair share of embarrassment over the years.” His eyes swing to his brother.

“Not really.” Sutton straightens.

“Really, Brother?” Remi’s gaze narrows.

“I’ve done a lot of things drunk.”

My gaze pivots to him when I feel his eyes on me.

“None that I can say I truly regret, though. Maybe in the moment or the days following but now... None.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I force out.

“Life’s too short to be constantly treading through regrets. All we can do is live in the moment.” A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you speak truer words,” Remi injects, pulling our attention to him. “How long are you in town for, anyway?” He changes the subject.

Thank God.

“Just the weekend. Why?”

“Just wondered how long I’d have to share my girl.”

“I think you mean *my* girl.” Sutton’s gaze narrows in on his brother.

“She was mine first,” Remi says matter-of-factly, a half shrug pulling up his shoulders.

“Okay, I think that’s enough of that.” I decide to cut in the middle before this pissing match can escalate.

“That’s okay. I can manage a weekend on my own.” Remi continues as if I didn’t even speak. “Which reminds me. Did you get the flight details for our trip, Pen?”

I can see the expression that slides across my face as if I were staring in a mirror watching it happen.

“Flight details for what?” Sutton asks before I can even think of what to say.

“Aspen has a work trip coming up and I’m going with her.”

“Is that so?” This time when I feel Sutton’s eyes on the side of my face, I hesitate to look at him.

“I have to get a statement from someone who apparently doesn’t understand the concept of answering the phone or returning calls. He’s actually located only a few miles from your parents, so we thought maybe

we'd use it as an excuse to visit," I say as if that somehow explains *why* Remi is coming, finally shifting toward him.

I never felt the need to explain anything before, but now things are different and I can't ignore this fact.

"And when is this trip?"

"We fly out a week from Monday."

"And you'll be there for how long?" He seems irritated that he has to keep asking questions rather than me just telling him the game plan outright.

"Not sure yet. Charles decided that since I'm familiar with the area, I should be the one to go. My orders are to not come back until I have the information I need. I can't imagine we'll be there more than a few days. Remi is coming with me so I don't have to go alone."

"Smart." He nods. "Then maybe I'll fly out and visit Mom and Dad for a couple of days while you're there. Have a little reunion of sorts."

"Oh, yay," Remi says sarcastically, tearing off another bite of bagel, his expression hollowing out.

"Do you have a problem with me visiting my parents?" Sutton arches a singular brow.

Remi finishes his bite before answering.

"Why can't you visit them another week?" The only thing missing from his question is a stomp of his foot and a pouting lip—that's how childish he sounds.

But I get it, too. He wants to make sure that whatever comes of me and Sutton doesn't take away from me and Remi. I don't want that either. But I also can't deny that having Sutton fly out, even if for a day or two while we're home, sounds incredible. I'm like a starved woman and Sutton is my only form of sustenance. I'll take as much of him as I can get when I can get it because I know it could be weeks before I get my fill again.

"I don't know. I was just thinking it might be nice for our parents if we both visit at the same time. You know how much Mom loves having us both home together. And since you're already going to be there."

"So this has nothing to do with you not wanting me and Aspen staying in a hotel room together?" he challenges.

"As long as you're not sleeping in the same bed, why would I care?"

"What if we *want* to sleep in the same bed?" Remi snarls.

"What if I decide I *want* to break your fucking nose?" Sutton fires back, fisting the white bag in his lap so hard it's a wonder it doesn't shred beneath

his grasp.

“I should have known you two could only play nice for so long.” I push to a stand, taking my coffee cup with me.

“Pen.” Remi stands, quickly followed by Sutton.

“It’s fine,” I tell him, setting my coffee cup in the sink. “This is weird,” I admit, looking between the two men. “And you know what, it’s probably going to continue to be that way no matter how much we try to force normalcy. But let me be clear about something. I am not an object that can be owned. I belong to neither of you. And I will not tolerate you two arguing like children over who gets to play with me. You are my best friend and I love you,” I speak directly to Remi before addressing Sutton. “And you are my *boyfriend*.” The word feels foreign on my tongue. “And I love you. If either of you can’t handle that, then I suggest you walk out that door now because things are going to get harder before they get easier.”

I hate that I sound so harsh, especially after everything I’ve done—specifically to Remi—but it needs to be said. We’ve all made our choices. Now we have to live with them.

“I’m sorry, Pen. You’re right.” Remi is the first to speak.

“I’m sorry, too.” Sutton looks first at me and then at his brother. “I guess we have a long way to go.”

“It would appear,” Remi agrees.

“Now, if you two don’t mind. I am going to go take a shower. Do me a favor and don’t kill each other while I’m gone.” With that, I take off toward the bathroom, grateful when the door closes, sealing me inside.

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Chapter Six

Sutton



“I’m sorry about earlier.” I drop a kiss to the top of Aspen’s head as we lie tangled in her bed sheets, having just found a very satisfying way to get out some of our frustrations with one another.

She wants to gallivant around with my brother like she always used to. I want her to understand that she’s with me now and I don’t want another man—especially not my brother—seeing her or touching her in a way that only I should be able to. And that includes sleeping in the same bed and all the other bullshit they’ve always done.

For my brother’s sake, I didn’t push the issue while he was here. He is the one who brought us back together after all, and because of this, I am trying to be somewhat sensitive to how he’s feeling. But sometimes, even the best of intentions have a way of smacking you in the face.

“Me too.” Aspen snuggles deeper into my side with a satisfied hum.

“But you were wrong about something you said.”

“And what’s that?” she asks, taking to drawing lazy circles across my abdomen with the tip of her index finger.

“You are *mine*. Not as a possession, but you’re *mine* just the same. You don’t have to ask my permission to do anything, but I do ask that you at least consult me before making certain decisions. I would have appreciated the opportunity to get to be the one to go with you on your trip.”

She peers up at me.

“Remi just volunteered. I had no intention of asking either of you to go with me. It wasn’t like I sought him out and chose him over you.”

“I know.” I blow out a slow breath, trying to expunge the ting of jealousy I feel from my chest. “It’s just... I can’t help but wonder if it will always be like this—the two of us fighting against each other for your time.”

“It won’t be.”

“How can you be so sure?” I brush the soft strands of her hair over her shoulder, letting my fingers linger on the side of her neck.

“Remi and I have never been in this situation. He’s never had a serious relationship and neither have I. It’s not just that it’s you. It’s that it’s anyone. It’s going to take time, but I think eventually we will find a new normal for us.”

“He can’t just force himself into your life at every turn. I mean, I get that he’s the reason I’m here. And I know how badly we hurt him. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’m here. Is it too much to expect that I be your priority and not him?”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?” She pushes herself upright, angling her body toward me.

“What do you mean?” I scoot farther up the pillow, tucking an arm beneath my head, which in turn gives me a better view of her exquisite fucking tits. This woman... I have to resist the urge to fist my cock she makes me so fucking hard. Even in the midst of what feels like a serious conversation, my body is ravenous for her.

“Why can’t you both be my priority?”

“That’s not how it works, Coop,” I disagree.

“Says who?”

“Says everyone.” I rest my free hand on her bare knee, having to fight the urge to move it up toward her inner thigh. I’ve never felt so desperate for contact as I do with Aspen, like I need to feel her always, to be as close to her as I can. “Think about marriage.” I force myself to continue. “When someone gets married and has children, their priorities shift from their friendships and their parents and siblings to *their* new family. That doesn’t mean they love the others any less, though.”

“I’ve put him through more than any one person deserves. I won’t then turn around and abandon him.”

“No one is asking you to. All I’m asking is that when things arise in your life, I’m the person you share it with first.”

“He lives here. I see him every day. Of course he’s going to find out some things before you do.”

“And you’re wrong. *You* haven’t put him through anything. We did. But Remi is your friend, not your boyfriend. You two have never even slept together and still he feels like he has some kind of claim over you. I don’t get it.”

“Because you don’t understand.”

“Don’t I?” I argue, not sure I even know *what* I’m arguing because is there even an argument to be had over this? She’s right. I don’t understand their relationship. I never have.

“No.” She shakes her head softly. “Remi thought maybe we could be more. He took my actions as a betrayal and they were. If I thought what I was doing was right, I wouldn’t have kept it from him.”

“But you don’t love him that way.”

“I don’t, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love him.” She hesitates like she wants to say more but isn’t sure she should.

“What is it?” I push when the words seem stuck somewhere on the way out.

“I just feel like I need to be completely up-front with you about some things. We really haven’t talked about what happened the night you left or the months we were apart and if I’ve learned anything from this situation, it’s that you can’t build something on lies.”

“Okay.” A knot that feels like the size of fucking Texas settles deep in my gut. Something about the way she’s looking at me right now tells me I’m not going to like what she has to say. “Did you sleep with him?”

“No,” she’s quick to answer, shaking her head adamantly.

“Then I don’t care,” I tell her. “I don’t care what was said or what happened. If you look me in the eye and tell me that I’m the one you want, then that’s good enough for me.”

“You are... The one I want, I mean. You’re the one I’ve always wanted.” A pink hue slides across her cheeks and she quickly looks away.

“Always?” A smile plays on my lips as I reach up, sliding my finger along her jaw as I coax her eyes back to me.

“This is so embarrassing.” She laughs nervously.

“Just say it.”

“I used to lie in bed at night and imagine this...” She gestures between the two of us. “And I mean, when I was like fourteen years old. I would try to imagine what it felt like for you to hold my hand, for you to kiss me, for you to”—she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth—“touch me.”

“I’ll admit, I suspected you had a crush on me for a while.”

“It went beyond a crush. I was basically obsessed with you.” She laughs at herself. “That’s why, when you took my hand at that party, I never looked

back. I knew it wouldn't mean anything to you, but I wanted to be with you so badly that I didn't care."

"I'm sorry."

She quickly silences me with a shake of her head.

"I'm not. I mean, I was mad for a lot of years, but I don't think I was really mad at you, but at myself. I was... going through some things, some bad things, and I used you as an escape. And once you were gone, I used you as something to blame. But the fact is, the thought of you got me through nights where I wasn't sure if I wanted to wake up the next day."

"Aspen." Her name is just a whisper on my lips.

"That's in the past." She quickly moves on and as much as I want to, I don't push.

I know she had a rough childhood. One day, she'll trust me enough to tell me what really happened. Until then, all I can do is love her. And fuck me, I do. I never wanted to fall in love. Never wanted to settle down or have a family. But I swear, sitting here looking at her, I see it all. The house. The kids. The life we could have. And I want it. Every fucking single ounce of it.

It doesn't matter what I thought I wanted. Aspen has changed everything. She's changed me, more than I ever thought anyone could.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that in ways you don't even realize, you saved me. I love Remi. He is my best friend in the entire world and he always will be. But you, Sutton, you are the thing I have waited my whole life for. You don't have to ask me to put you first. You've always been first, even when you didn't realize it."

The irritation I felt earlier—the unfamiliar thread of jealousy I kept pulling—her words settle me in a way I can't easily explain.

"I'm not a man who's accustomed to being at the mercy of others, but you, Coop, you bring me to my fucking knees." I reach up, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck before pulling her back down into my arms.

Her lips no more than brush mine and I roll us both, pinning her beneath me. I kiss her long and deep, relishing in how fucking sweet she tastes.

"I love you." I groan against her mouth, already lining myself at her entrance.

"I love you." She pants, nails biting into my back as I thrust inside of her in one fluid movement.

She feels like heaven wrapped around me. Like her body was made for mine—we fit so perfectly together. I don't have to wonder what I took for

granted all those years ago. I already know. She was right there in front of me for years and still I refused to see it. But not anymore.

I see it now so clearly it feels etched on my fucking skin.

She is the reason. The reason I walked around for years convinced that I was incapable of loving someone. The reason that any kind of emotional connection to a woman evaded me. It wasn't that my heart didn't know how to love. It was that it was waiting for her. *I* was waiting for her. And now that I have her, now that she's truly mine, there isn't a single fucking thing I won't do to keep her.

If living without her these past couple of months has taught me anything, it's that I never want to do it again.

"Marry me." The words are off my lips before I can take them back.

It's irrational and entirely too soon, but fuck, I want to tie myself to this woman in every humanly way possible.

"Sutton." She's so close now. I can feel her begin to tighten around my shaft, causing my own release to threaten. I fight it back, not ready to let go just yet.

"Marry me," I repeat, thrusting harder, taking her higher.

She explodes around me, my name falling from her lips again. I let myself go at the exact moment she contracts and together, we ride the wave of pleasure until we've milked every last drop of the high.

I don't shift my weight, wanting to keep this physical connection between our bodies as long as I possibly can.

"Are you going to answer me?" I speak directly into her ear, trailing my tongue along the soft lobe.

"That depends. Are you going to ask me when your dick isn't inside of me?"

Despite every objection from my body, I quickly pull out, smiling against the crook of her neck.

"Better?"

"Sutton." Something in her voice has me arching back to look at her.

"Do you not want to marry me?" I ask, having honestly not really considered the possibility, especially given everything she said earlier.

"Are you kidding? Of course I do. But, I mean, this is still really new. We've only been officially together for a few short days."

"Not really. We've basically been together since June. That's five months. That's longer than a lot of couples wait to get engaged."

“We’re not most couples. And three out of those five months we were apart. So at best, we’ve got two months under our belts.”

“So you don’t know if you love me enough to marry me?”

“That’s not at all what I said.” She shakes her head softly.

“Are you worried about what Remi will think?”

She doesn’t have to answer with words. Her expression says it all.

Rolling off of her, as soon as I’m standing, I reach down and help her out of bed.

“What are you doing?” She eyes me suspiciously as I drop down onto my knees.

“Asking you to marry me. Isn’t this how it’s done?”

“I’m naked,” she states the obvious.

“Exactly how I prefer you.” I lean in, kissing just beneath her belly button.

“Do you have a ring?” She smirks down at me.

“Fuck. A ring. Hang on.” I quickly stand, moving around the room like a fucking Tasmanian devil as I try to find something that will suffice for the time being.

Aspen doesn’t move, watching me with a curious gaze and a soft smile on her lips. She thinks I’m fucking around, but I’m about to show her I am dead fucking serious.

Finally, I find the motherload of small little rubber bands. I recognize them from when Aspen braids her hair. And while a rubber band probably isn’t the smartest thing to wear on your finger, it seems big enough not to cut off her circulation at least, and for now, that’ll do.

Returning to her, I drop back down onto my knees, taking her left hand. “Coop, you have changed my life in ways I didn’t think possible. I know you think it’s too soon and you’re worried about what other people will think, but for me, it feels not soon enough. I already know I want to spend forever with you. All you have to do is say you want that too.”

“You know I do.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“There’s still so much to figure out.”

“We can do it together.”

“What about Remi?”

“He’ll be happy for us... Eventually.”

“You know I don’t want kids.”

“I don’t care about that. All I want is you.”

“Or a big wedding. I’m not even sure I want a wedding.”

“I don’t care if we say I do at a courthouse, as long as when it’s over I get to call you my wife.”

“I’m not leaving D.C.” She continues to list her reasons why she thinks this won’t work.

“I wouldn’t ask you to. Which is why I’m coming to you.”

“When?”

“Say yes and I’ll explain everything.”

“Sutton.” She visibly shakes from nerves.

“Say yes, and I promise we will figure it all out.”

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Still not a yes.” I grin up at her, knowing I’ve won.

And damn, I’ve never been so happy to be right when the one word I’ve been waiting for finally slides past her lips.

“Yes,” she croaks, watching me slip the rubber band on her finger with tear-filled eyes.

I’m not even completely upright when her arms come around my neck. I pull her flush against me, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair.

“I will get you a real ring,” I promise, pulling back to see her cheeks stained with tears. Using the pads of my thumbs, I quickly wipe them away.

“I don’t care about a ring, or a wedding, or anything else for that matter. I just want you.”

“You have me. From this day until the end of our days, I am yours.”

“And I am yours.” She pulls my hands from her face, wrapping her fingers around mine. “I love you,” she mouths.

“I love you,” I mouth back.

I don’t have time to think about what I just did or why—it feels too right to question it. Instead, I lift her up and deposit her back onto the bed before going back to my most favorite place in the world, right between her thighs.



“Morning.” I kiss the side of Aspen’s neck as she stands in front of the stove, scrambling eggs in nothing but an oversized T-shirt.

“Morning.” She hums when I press into her from behind so that I’m able to watch her work over her shoulder.

I expected to wake up this morning weighed with regret over my rash decision to propose to someone I’ve only just really started dating, but the instant I walked into the kitchen and saw her standing there, I felt nothing but happiness.

In truth, I didn’t know I could feel this way. And while yes, I know everything is still so new, I can’t help but see my entire future play out when I look at her—like a story that’s been outlined but yet to be written—I can see it all so clearly.

“You’re up just in time.” She shuffles the eggs around with a spatula. “I hope you’re hungry.” She turns the burner off before lifting the pan.

I step back just enough to give her room to dump the eggs onto two waiting plates already filled with sausage links and toast.

“Starving.” I wait until she sets the hot skillet back onto the stovetop before pressing into her from behind again, my arms linking around her small waist.

“I meant for food.” She giggles when I nuzzle her neck, nipping gently at her flesh.

“I *am* hungry for that too.” I suck her earlobe into my mouth, rolling the soft nub along my tongue. “But I think I’ll have dessert first.”

She catches my hand as it slides down her stomach, both of us very aware of its destination.

“Oh no, you don’t. Breakfast first.” She shimmies out of my grasp and even though I know I could keep her in place if I wanted, I reluctantly let her go.

If she took the time to cook me breakfast, I guess the least I can do is eat it while it’s still warm. But afterward... Well, let’s just say I’m already envisioning spreading her wide-open on the breakfast bar where she turns to set the plates. Then the real feast will begin.

Fuck... My cock throbs in anticipation.

It doesn’t matter what I do. I just can’t seem to get my fill of her.

“And then dessert?” I grin, raising my eyebrows suggestively.

“Guess you’ll have to sit down to find out.” She slips onto one of the stools, turning ever so slightly so that I can see the thin pink material of her panties.

Little fucking tease.

“Well, are you coming?” Her tongue darts out, dragging slowly across her bottom lip. My eyes track the movement, not able to look away.

Yep, definitely no regrets.

Not a single fucking one.

Because looking at her now, I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is where I want to be. Right here, with her.

“Oh, I’m coming all right.” I stalk toward her, having to resist the urge to step between her spread thighs rather than take the stool by her side.

Picking up the fork left next to the plate, I shovel a too big bite of eggs into my mouth before angling my face in her direction.

“Eat up, Coop. You’re going to need the energy.” My words drip with promise as I stab a sausage link with my fork, eating the whole thing in one bite.

“You could chew, you know.” She chuckles, turning her attention to her own plate.

“I am chewing.” I snort. Popping another link into my mouth, I chew it slowly this time, overexaggerating each clamp of my teeth, the action earning me quite the eye roll.

“And here I thought Remi was the only man-child in your family.” She shakes her head, taking a dainty little bite of toast.

“Did you just call me a child and compare me to my brother in the same breath?” I knock my knee against hers.

“If the shoe fits.” She shrugs, fighting to hide her smile as she takes another bite of toast. “And you know, there are worse things in the world than being compared to your brother.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.” She shovels eggs around her plate, never actually taking a bite.

“Can I ask you a serious question?”

“Of course.” I edge slightly in her direction so that I can meet her gaze.

“Last night...” Her cheeks flush pink in an instant.

“You want to know if I meant it?”

“I just... I know people can say and do things in the heat of the moment and I just want you to know—”

“Don’t try to give me an out. I don’t need it.” I take her hand, letting my thumb skirt along the tiny rubber band she’s still wearing on her finger. “I meant what I said. I know what I want.”

“It’s just... Soon, really soon. And then there’s Remi to consider and your parents...”

“So that’s your hang-up, my brother?”

“No, I just—”

“You said you wanted to be with me.”

“I do.”

“Then why do I get the feeling you’re trying to get out of agreeing to marry me?” I try to keep the agitation from my voice, but I’m not sure I’m very successful in my attempts.

“I’m not. I just—I’m just not sure we thought this through completely.”

“And what exactly is there to think through? I thought we worked this all out last night. I want to marry you. You said you wanted to marry me.”

“I do.” Her voice softens as she turns her palm up, allowing me to slip my fingers through hers. “More than anything. I’m just worried, is all. If we’re going to do this, I have to know it’s for the right reasons and not because you feel like you need to slap a ring on my finger to make sure I’m yours and not Remi’s.”

“Is that why you think I asked you?” I lean in close, trailing the back of my hand along the side of her neck. The feel of her soft skin beneath my touch soothes my fleeting anger. “You think I’m trying to stake my claim?”

“The timing is suspicious, given that just hours before you two were arguing over me like I was some toy you didn’t want to share.”

“You are not a toy and I’m sorry if I made you feel that way. But this isn’t about Remi. This isn’t about *staking my claim* on you. This is about me, asking the woman I love to be my wife. I know it’s sudden. Trust me, I know. Six months ago marriage was the absolute last thing on my mind. In fact, I was pretty convinced I would never get married. But then you came storming into my life—again—throwing shit all over the place, and I quickly realized I love the mess you make of my life.”

“You think I make a mess of your life?” Her brow furrows in confusion like she’s not sure how to take that.

“In the best fucking way possible,” I murmur, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck and pulling her close. The stools are close enough that we’re both able to remain seated. “I’m in love with you. Is it really so bad if I want you to be mine in every way that matters?”

“I guess not.” I feel the smile on her lips rather than see it as I press a soft kiss there.

“We don’t have to figure this out now.” I pull back to look into her eyes, counting the green and yellow flecks that seem to almost glow this close up. “Hell, we don’t have to tell Remi or anyone else anytime soon. This is something that can be just ours. And when we decide that it’s time, we’ll let everyone else in. I don’t need the world to know you’re mine just yet—as long as you know it.”

“I do.”

“Now, can I finish this delicious breakfast you made for us or do we need to solve any more of life’s problems before I can continue?”

She shoves my shoulder playfully.

“You can eat.” She sticks her tongue out at me and the vision of her sliding it up my shaft has me shifting almost uncomfortably in my seat.

I’d just about give my left testicle to feel her mouth warm and wet around me, but after what happened the first time I attempted it, there’s not a chance in hell I’m going there again. No, she’s going to have to be the one to initiate it *if* said act is to ever happen.

“Thank you, warden.” I snicker when she pokes me in the ribs.

“Keep that up and I’ll show you warden,” she warns, tearing off a bite of toast between her teeth.

“Was that supposed to be a threat? ’Cause I gotta tell ya, I’m much more inclined to keep it up after hearing you say that.”

“So dirty.” She grins.

“If I remember right, Coop, you quite like my dirty mouth.” I shovel a bite of eggs into said mouth, which have grown cold, giving her a knowing look.

Her cheeks flush again, this time for a very different reason.

“Now finish your breakfast. I’m rather looking forward to my dessert,” I tell her.

“Why wait? Life’s too short not to eat dessert first.”

“I thought you didn’t want the food to get cold?” I inch closer.

“I thought you didn’t care if it was cold.”

I don’t have to be told twice. One second, I’m ass down on the stool. The next, I’m on my knees between milky thighs, feasting on my favorite thing—Aspen.

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Chapter Seven

Aspen



“So, I have a question.” I wiggle my feet that are resting in Remi’s lap, as I lie stretched out on the couch with Remi on the opposite end.

“Shoot.” He looks away from the television to meet my gaze.

“How upset would you be if we didn’t stay in the hotel when we get to Ohio?”

“What do mean? Where would we stay?”

“Well, I talked to Sutton earlier and he suggested that maybe we could all stay at your parents’ house for a few days instead.”

“Of course he did.” He shakes his head slowly, trying to hide his irritation.

“Why do you say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Pen? He doesn’t want us staying in a hotel room together.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” I disagree, knowing that while it may not be the whole reason, it’s definitely a big part of it.

Sutton is uncomfortable with Remi’s and my relationship after everything that’s happened in the past few months, and I get it. If roles were reversed, I might feel a little uneasy about it too. And while I have no intention of changing who Remi and I are, I’m determined to find middle ground.

“Don’t you start lying for him, too. I know my brother. I may have been the one to bring him back into your life, but in his eyes, you’re his now and he’s never been very good at sharing.”

“We’ve been over this, Rem. I don’t belong to him any more than I belong to you. I am a person, not an object.”

“Maybe you should remind Sutton of this fact.”

“I have. And while yes, a part of him isn’t exactly thrilled about the idea of us sharing a room, he suggested staying at your parents’ so we could all be

together.”

“You’re kidding yourself if you think we’re going to *all* be together. He’s going to keep you to himself and I will have gone on this trip for nothing.”

“That’s not true.”

“Pen.” He sits up straighter, sliding my feet from his lap. “How about I make this easy for you and not go at all?”

“No.” I push myself upright, reaching for his hand when he moves to get up.

I don’t realize why he’s gone stiff until I follow his line of sight to where the tiny rubber band sits on my ring finger. Shit. I internally curse at myself. I had every intention of taking it off before he came over but got distracted and never did.

“Why is there a rubber band on your finger?” His gaze comes to mine, brows furrowed.

“I don’t know.” I choke on the lie. “I was going to braid my hair earlier, so I slipped it on my finger. Guess I forgot about it.” I pull my hand away, quickly rolling the band off my finger even though it feels wrong to do so.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to put rubber bands around any extremity of your body?” He snorts, thankfully not questioning it further. I mean, why would he? It’s a freaking rubber band, for goodness’ sake. Why would he have any reason to doubt why it’s there?

And yet, a part of me wishes he hadn’t bought it so easily, because remember my promise not to lie to Remi anymore? Yeah, well, as you can tell, I’m not doing a very good job of keeping it. But this is different. He knows Sutton and I are together. I’m just not ready to tell him that after just a couple of weeks of him coming back into my life, I’ve already agreed to marry him. It sounds crazy enough to me, and I’m the one who said yes. I can only imagine how nuts Remi would think I am.

I want to regret my decision to say yes. I *feel* like I should regret it. But I don’t. Not for a single second. How could I when it truly is all I’ve ever wanted—for Sutton to be mine.

“It hasn’t been on there long enough to do anything.” I crinkle my nose, turning to set the band on the end table next to me.

In reality, I haven’t taken the band off since Sutton put it on there four days ago. It’s a small band but not so small that it cuts off my circulation. If anything, it’s difficult to keep on. And while I’m sure Sutton had no intention of me actually wearing it when he put it on my finger as a symbol of the ring

that will one day sit there, every time I actually considered taking it off, I changed my mind. Because every time I looked at it, I saw him—Sutton—on his knees in front of me, asking me to be his wife.

“And you’re going.” I refocus on our original conversation. “Sutton isn’t going to be there the whole time. He’s flying out later than us and he said he has some things to take care of while he’s there. Besides, you’re on work duty with me, so we’ll get plenty of time just the two of us.”

“So why are we staying at my parents’ house then? Why not stay at the hotel and then go to my parents’ while Sutton’s in town?”

“Do you really believe your mother wouldn’t skin our hides if we didn’t stay there?” I say instead of the truth, which is that I’m trying to be sensitive to Sutton’s feelings when it comes to me and Remi.

I understand our friendship isn’t the most conventional. We’ve spent years acting more like an actual couple than just friends. But I’m with Sutton now and things have to change. I’m trying to find small compromises that will keep everyone happy—including myself. Because while I know Remi’s and my friendship will inevitably be different—hell, it already is—I don’t want so much to change that we’re no longer the same either—if that makes any sense at all.

“I guess she probably wouldn’t be too happy about it. But what about work? Won’t they find it odd that you don’t need hotel accommodations?”

“I’ve already spoken to Charles to make sure it was okay that I stayed with family. Saves the firm a few hundred dollars, so of course he didn’t have an issue with it.” I pause, reclaiming his hand. “Look, I know it’s not the trip we originally discussed, but I think in a way, this will be better. Sutton is my life now, Rem, and the three of us are going to have to find a way to coexist. I want you with me, always. But in order for that to happen, you have to make peace with your brother.”

“I have made peace with him. Or have you forgotten? I’m the reason—”

“You’re the reason he came back,” I interrupt. “I know. But you only did that for me. That’s not the same thing.”

“I would do anything for you.” He releases my hand, sliding his arm around my shoulder before relaxing back into the couch, taking me with him. I slide my hand across his stomach, curling into him the way I have a million times before.

“If that’s true, then I need you to do this. I know I’ve asked too much of you. I know I’ve hurt you. But, Rem, if we’re ever going to be truly okay, I

need you and Sutton to bury this rivalry you've had brewing for as long as I've known you."

"Fuck, Pen, I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"You can begin by coming with me and spending some time with your brother."

"You mean spend time watching him hang all over you and rub you in my face?"

"He's not rubbing me in your face. I was yours first, remember?" I glance up at the side of his handsome face. "He just wants to fix things. He wants to have a real relationship with you."

"Only because he knows it's important to you."

"It shouldn't matter why. He's your brother, Remi."

"He sure hasn't acted like much of a brother." He huffs.

"I haven't acted like much of a friend as of late, but you still love me."

He tips his chin, his gaze meeting mine.

"Nothing you could ever do would make me stop loving you. But, Pen, you're not Sutton."

"You're right, I'm not. Sutton is your blood."

"And?"

"He's the only sibling you have. One of these days, your parents will be gone and he will be the only family you have left."

"I just don't know if I can," he finally admits, his voice soft as he drops his head back to look up at the ceiling. "He's going to ruin everything."

"What do you mean, ruin everything?"

"He's going to take you away from me completely, Pen. I know it."

"Hey"—I grasp his chin between my thumb and forefinger, pulling his face back down to mine—"I won't let that happen. You are the most important person in my life. I'm not going anywhere."

"You say that now."

"There is no now about it. I mean that always. Sutton doesn't change who we are. You have to promise me you won't let him."

"Not sure I can do a whole lot about it."

"You can. If you and Sutton can put the past in the past and move on as brothers and not enemies. He's your brother, Remi. He loves you, even if he's shit at showing it. And deep down, I know you love him, too. So, stop being so freaking stubborn and just try. Can you do that?"

He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes seeming to catch every piece of light coming off the television, making them look more green than they usually do.

“I can do that.” He finally concedes, rolling his eyes when a smile splits my face.

“You’re the best. You know that?”

“Make sure to repeat that sentiment every time my brother is in the room. If we’re going to *have* to get along, best if he knows his place.” He smirks.

“You Barnett brothers.” I chuckle, pushing myself fully upright. “You’re more alike than either of you realizes.”

“Take that back right now!” His eyes go wide with playful shock.

“Nope.” I pop my lips. “I said what I said and I stand by it.”

“Pen...” He narrows his gaze in warning.

“It’s not an insult, you know?” My shoulders shake with laughter.

“Last chance.”

“Or what? What are you going to do, Remi?”

I anticipate his movement before he makes it, but it doesn’t help me from stopping him when in one abrupt shift, he has my foot in his hand.

“This.” He teases a finger along the arch of my foot, causing my whole body to tense.

“You wouldn’t.” I try to pull my foot away to no avail.

“Won’t I?” He cocks his head to the side. “Perhaps you’d like to reconsider your stance on the matter?”

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“Then you only have yourself to blame.”

With that, he goes into full tickle mode, hitting me in just the right spots that have me both screaming and laughing all at the same time. I try to wiggle out of his grasp, kicking with my other foot, but that only manages to give him access to both of my feet, which he quickly clamps down in his lap, holding them both with ease with one hand, despite how violently I struggle to pull them away.

“Okay! Okay!” I finally concede when I seriously can’t take a second more of his tickling torture.

“Okay, what?” He stops abruptly.

“What I said about you and Sutton...” I haven’t even finished the sentence when I feel Remi’s grip loosen. It isn’t much, but it’s just enough that I’m

able to kick free and roll onto the floor with a hard thud before he can regain control.

“Pen!” He’s on his feet in an instant, rolling me to my back to get a good look at my arms and legs. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I smile up at his large frame now towering over me. “Smacked my elbow on the floor, but it was worth it.” I hold my hands up to him.

He shakes his head, clearly not sure about me sometimes, as he takes my hands and effortlessly tugs me to my feet.

“Truce?” I pull my hands from his, taking a full step back in case he decides to attack again.

“Truce,” he agrees.

“So, we can stay at your parents’?”

“We can stay at my parents’.”

“And you’ll try to at least tolerate your brother?”

“I will *try*.” He emphasizes the word.

“That’s all I can ask.” I give him a wide grin. “Now that that’s out of the way, how do you feel about pizza? I’m starving all of a sudden.”

“Fine. But only if you let me pay.”

“Like you’d really give me a choice either way.” I turn, heading to the breakfast bar where I left my phone earlier. “The usual?” I call over my shoulder, pulling the app up on my phone.

“Obviously.” He flops back down onto the couch, stretching his long legs out to rest his feet on the ottoman, and just like that, it’s like the Sutton topic was never even brought up.

Remi and I spend the rest of the evening eating pizza and binge-watching reruns of *Dexter*. And for the first time in a very long time, I feel like maybe we really are going to be okay.



“Who are you texting?” Remi adjusts his grip on his bag as he glances over my shoulder at my phone.

“Just letting the office know I landed and confirming address details on one Mr. Max Evans.”

“Pen, we just landed. Surely you’re not planning on going to see him right away.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I was thinking. If he’s being this elusive, it might take me a few tries to finally wear him down into seeing me. Best that I hit the ground running, don’t you think?” I grab my own bag, but before I can hoist it up, Remi takes it, sliding it over the same shoulder he has his own bag on.

“The longer it takes, the longer you can stay.”

“Exactly. Which is why I want to get it done. If come next week I still haven’t managed to secure this meeting, I could very well be stuck here by myself.” I grimace at the thought.

“I wouldn’t leave you.”

“So you’d just stay here? I’m sure your employer would love that.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do. You love your job. Now stop. I’ve already confirmed with Charles that the earliest I will be back in the office is next week. So, if by some stroke of luck, I’m able to pin him down first thing, then the rest of the week I can spend with you.”

“And my brother,” he grumbles.

“You promised to play nice.” I remind him as together we make our way toward the rental car booth. Since the company is paying for it, I figured I’d let them provide a vehicle so I’m not having to Uber everywhere.

“Did I promise that?” He nudges his arm against mine. “What time is my dear older brother getting into town anyway?”

“He’s flying in tomorrow morning,” I say, trying to keep the excitement from my voice when in reality I’m tied in knots with joyful anticipation. I miss him more than what is probably considered healthy at this point.

“So I get you all to myself this evening?” The glint in his eyes says he’s happy about this fact.

“Well, not exactly. We are going to your parents’ house and you know your mom is going to want to spend some time with you the second we arrive.”

“With us,” he corrects. “She’s going to want to spend time with us.”

“Right.” I pull to a stop at the car booth, coming to stand behind a middle-aged couple that is a handful of people back in line.

I won’t lie and say I’m not nervous to face Summer and Randel after everything that’s happened between me and their two sons. Remi said they

don't know details about anything, and while that helps, it doesn't completely erase my worry.

The last thing I want to do is upset either of them. Though I can't imagine Summer would be upset with me for loving her sons. And I do—both of them. I love them both with everything that I am. Hopefully, she can see that and support Sutton and me being together. I don't see why she wouldn't, but I won't rest easy until I hear it straight from her lips.

"You okay?" Remi must see something in my expression despite how hard I work to keep it neutral.

"Yeah, just ready to get out of this airport." Not a lie, but not the full truth either.

I feel like that's all I ever give Remi anymore, half-truths. I can't help it. If I tell him the truth, he'll feel the need to reassure me and then he'll worry that I'm still worried, and really, it's stupid for us both to be worrying about something that's probably nothing anyway.

"You and me both," he agrees with a nod, stepping closer so that, if I were taller, we'd be standing shoulder to shoulder. "What do you say, before you go on a manhunt, we stop by Harper's for a milkshake? I've been dying for a PB Choco Nana." He licks his lips dramatically. "Harper's milkshakes are one of the only things I miss living in D.C."

"You and your peanut butter and banana obsession." I shake my head, having never understood the combination and why so many people like it.

"Don't forget the chocolate," he adds with a snicker. "Besides, Elvis loved peanut butter and bananas, and if it was good enough for the king, it can't be all that bad." He gives me a cheeky grin.

"Fine, we can stop by Harper's for a shake, but then it's straight to work. The sooner I can get this over with, the better."

"Aye, aye, captain." He does a weird little salute, reminding me yet again why I love him so damn much.

Even when I'm running rampant with nerves—for multiple reasons—Remi finds a way to lighten the mood. I feel sorry for anyone who doesn't have a Remi in their lives. Just plain sorry.



“Don’t worry, we’ll get him tomorrow,” Remi says for the twentieth time since we left both the residence and workplace of Mr. Evans without any luck in tracking him down.

“Given the blow off the lady at his office gave me, I don’t feel great about it,” I admit, turning onto Summer and Randel’s street. Very rarely do I drive, but given the rental car is only insured for me, I thought it best, though Remi did have quite the pout fest when learning he was riding passenger today.

It’s strange being back here again, especially so soon. I spent six years avoiding this place and now I’ve been here twice in the same year. Guess that just goes to show how quickly life can change.

The last time we were here, I was sick with nerves over seeing Sutton again. I lost sleep over it for days leading up to the trip and even after seeing him again for the first time, I walked around with a constant pit in the bottom of my stomach.

This time, I’m excited to be here. And while yes, Harris crossed my mind the second we entered the city limits, the thought of him doesn’t quite hold the same power over me that it used to. I know he can’t hurt me anymore. I have two Barnett brothers who would kill him before they let that happen.

“She came around a little at the end. Promised to get the message to him,” Remi reminds me.

“Yeah, after you turned on the charm.” I snort, slowing to a stop in front of Remi’s childhood home. “And giving him the message is very different than actually meeting with him. It’s crazy the lengths people will go through not to get pulled into a legal battle. I mean, I get it, I wouldn’t want to be involved in a civil case either. Or any kind of court case for that matter.”

“You’re involved in court cases every day,” he needlessly points out, waiting until I put the car in park and kill the engine before unlatching his seat belt.

“You know what I mean.” I roll my eyes, pushing open the car door.

It isn’t until my feet are planted on the concrete and I’m looking up at the house that is so familiar it feels like my own, that my earlier nervousness over seeing Summer and Randel returns.

I know I shouldn’t worry—Remi’s already given me all the reassurances I should need—and yet, I can’t help it. Summer always believed Remi and I would end up together one day. Instead, I betrayed Remi and chose his older brother. Not that she knows all the messy details, but I’m sure she suspects

there's more to it than Sutton and I just decided one day we wanted to start dating.

"You ready?" I don't realize Remi has already gathered our bags from the car until I look up to find him standing on the sidewalk, waiting for me.

"Yep." I move around the car to join him on the walkway.

"You have nothing to worry about."

"I know." I blow out a small breath, not at all surprised that he's able to read my expression so easily.

Makes me wonder how he didn't know about me and Sutton. Or maybe he did. Maybe he sensed it all along but chose to ignore it because ignoring it was easier than facing it. I get it. I didn't want to face it either at first.

"All she cares about is if you're happy."

"Even if that happiness makes you unhappy?" I follow him up the front porch stairs.

"Your happiness could never make me unhappy," he promises. "Now stop it," he gently scolds.

"I'm stopping." I force a smile to my lips seconds before Remi is guiding me through the front door.

We've barely made it into the foyer when Summer appears around the corner, her husband following closely.

"There they are." One arm goes around me while the other around her son, hugging us both at the same time.

"Hi, Mom." I can hear the smile in Remi's voice.

"It's so good to see you." When she releases us, Randel steps up, giving us each a nod of hello.

"How was your flight?" I'm met with familiar green eyes that look so much like Remi's, sometimes it's like I'm looking at him instead.

"It was good." Remi is the first to answer. "The ride here, however..."

"Hey." I shove his shoulder.

"I'm just saying, Pen, you're a shit driver."

"I got you here in one piece, didn't I?" I argue.

"Don't listen to him, Aspen. He's the one who insists his father is a better driver than me and we all know that is a lie." Summer moves to stand next to me, draping an arm around my shoulders. "Are you hungry?" She guides me toward the back of the house, Remi and Randel following directly behind us.

"Not really. Your son insisted we get milkshakes, and I'm still pretty full."

“How are you still full? That was four hours ago.” Remi drops our bags inside the living room before joining me in the kitchen where Summer leaves me at the breakfast bar to tend to whatever is on the stove.

“Some of us don’t eat ten times a day,” I inform him, sliding onto one of the barstools.

“Some days I only eat five or six times.” Remi takes the seat next to me.

“You’re not exactly proving me wrong here.” I bump my arm into his.

“Whatever you’re cooking, Mom, it smells delicious,” Remi says instead, addressing Summer’s back.

“I made ravioli soup and I have some garlic bread finishing in the oven and a salad mixed up in the fridge.” She sets the spoon she’s stirring the soup with onto a saucer before turning back to face us.

“You sure you’re not hungry?” It’s Remi’s turn to knock my arm with his. Damn it, he knows how much I love Summer’s ravioli soup.

“I could be hungry for some ravioli soup,” I admit.

“Wonderful.” Summer smiles widely. “I’ll just get everything to the table and then we can eat.”

“We can eat right here,” Remi interjects. “No sense in taking everything into the dining room.”

“I already tried to tell her that, but she insisted.” Randel moves to the refrigerator to retrieve the salad.

“We don’t get to use the room very often. I like to take advantage of it when we have the opportunity to use it. Now hush up and come get some salad plates and bowls.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Remi pushes to his feet, heading around the bar to the cabinet where the plates are kept.

“Aspen, honey, would you mind grabbing me the bread basket?”

“Of course.” I stand, moving the stool to retrieve the bread basket that I know she keeps tucked under the breakfast bar with her other serving dishes.

“Why is it I get an order and she gets an *Aspen, honey?*” Remi does a laughable performance at impersonating his mother.

“Because I like her more,” she tells him matter-of-factly, a wide smile accenting the wrinkles that now line her eyes—something I noticed the last time we were here. While I was hiding in D.C., Randel and Summer aged quite a bit. I guess six years is more significant for someone in their fifties than it is for someone in their twenties.

“Ha! Ha!” I straighten with the basket in my hands, unable to resist rubbing her statement in his face.

“Not cool, Mom.” He stacks four bowls on top of the four plates he already retrieved, picking the whole lot up at once. “Not cool.” With that, he spins on his heel and exits the kitchen, precariously stacked dishes in tow.

Randel chuckles, following his son from the room with a large bowl of salad in his hands.

“Here you go.” I stop next to Summer, handing her the basket for the bread.

“While we’re alone...”

My stomach twists anxiously. Nothing good ever comes from someone saying *while we’re alone*. It implies she wants to talk about something that she doesn’t want the others to hear. And given everything that’s happened as of late, I can only imagine what that might be.

“Remi told me about you and Sutton.” She rests her hand on my forearm, giving it a little squeeze.

“Are you upset with me?”

“Of course not. You are my daughter in every way that counts. I could never be upset with you for following your heart. It’s just...” She hesitates, making me feel like maybe she doesn’t wholeheartedly mean what she just said. “It’s hard to be happy for one child, and I am happy for you and Sutton both. Lord knows he needs someone like you in his life. But it’s hard knowing my other child is hurting.”

“Did Remi say something to you?” Heat spreads up the back of my neck.

“My dear girl, he doesn’t have to. I know my son. And I know he would do anything for you, including putting on a brave face when he’s in pain.”

“I never meant to hurt him.”

“I know that, of course I do. But that’s not why I wanted to speak to you. I just needed you to hear it from me that Randel and I fully support your relationship with Sutton. I can already tell how much you’ve changed him.”

“How?” I can’t help but ask.

“Well, for starters, he actually calls me now. He never used to do that. He seems... different.”

“I really love him.” The admission feels foreign coming from my lips. I’ve grown so accustomed to hiding how I feel that to finally share it feels strange.

“And it’s clear to me that he loves you, too. Just go easy on Remi. It’s going to take some time for him to get over you.”

“Summer, it’s not—”

“I know what it is. He loves you too. He probably always will. And that’s okay. We’re not always meant to end up with someone, no matter how much we love them.”

“He will be my best friend until the day I die.” I say in lieu of saying something she likely wouldn’t believe.

“I couldn’t ask for more.” She squeezes my arm again.

I’ve imagined having this conversation a million times over in my head, but not once did it play out quite like this. Probably because I wasn’t giving Summer enough credit. I was treating her like Remi and Sutton’s mom and not like *my* mom. Lord knows she’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a mother. I should have known she wouldn’t be angry with me.

“Table is set.” We both look up when Remi reenters the room.

“Everything okay?” he asks when he realizes he’s walked in on something.

“Everything is perfect.” Summer smiles at her youngest son. “Now why don’t you get a bottle of wine and some glasses, and Aspen and I will meet you in the dining room with the rest?”

Remi’s gaze comes to me, his silent way of making sure I’m okay. I give him a nod and a small smile to let him know I’m fine, and it isn’t until he has this confirmation that he does as his mother asks.

While Remi is getting the wine, I help Summer transfer the soup and bread into their appropriate serving dishes before helping her carry them to the dining room.

A little while later, as we’re all sitting around the table sipping wine and listening to Remi once again tell some over-the-top story about something that happened at work, I realize something I never truly have before.

My whole life I felt like a half of me was missing because I didn’t have a family. No mom or dad. No one who truly wanted me. I couldn’t see it then, but I can see it now. The family I was so desperate for—well, it’s been here all along.

They welcomed me into their home, into their lives, and made me a part of their family for no other reason than they wanted to.

I used to think if it wasn’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck. But now I see that isn’t true either. Looking around this table, I realize just how lucky I

truly am. And in this moment, I make a promise to myself to never take it for granted ever again.

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Chapter Eight

Sutton



“I should go.” Aspen moves to roll out of my too-small bed, but I thwart her attempts by snaking my arm around her middle and pulling her back down. “Sutton.” She sighs heavily. “Your parents have been very accepting of our relationship, but I don’t think they would take too lightly to finding me in your bed when I was given explicit instructions that I was to sleep in my own room.”

“Just five more minutes,” I plead, snuggling my face into her neck as I wrap my limbs around her like a cocoon.

“Until five minutes pass and you’re still holding me hostage.” I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t enjoy it.”

“Enjoy what?” She plays coy.

“How I can never seem to get my fill of you.” I kiss just beneath her ear.

“I’ll admit, I don’t mind it.” She moves her ass against my dick, which instantly stirs.

“Are you trying to get me to never let you leave?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, you’re doing a damn good job.” I grind into her, letting her feel the thickening of my erection.

“It would appear so.” She lets out a soft squeal when I press into her harder. “Sutton, I really have to go.” Her words lack any real conviction.

“Oh, I’ll let you go all right. Once I’ve had my fill of you, that is.” I shift, rolling her onto her back and pinning her beneath me before she can even think to object.

“I thought you said you could never get your fill of me,” she reminds me of something I literally just said sixty seconds ago.

“Exactly.” My lips are still tilted in a smile when they touch hers. “Now, are you going to let me have you or do I have to beg?”

She hums deep in her throat.

“As much as I would love for you to beg...” She slides her tongue along the seam of my mouth.

I groan, sinking inside of her within seconds of settling between her thighs.

“You’re my fucking kryptonite, Coop,” I rasp in her ear as I move.

“I... know... the... feeling.” Her words are choppy and broken as her nails dig into my back.

She’s fighting to keep quiet, that much is clear, especially when she buries her face into my chest to mask a soft groan.

Aspen Cooper is anything but quiet. It’s something I learned the first night we spent at her apartment together. When she’s not worried about someone hearing, she’s quite vocal, and while I love that side of her more than I could ever say, there’s something about her being forced to hold it in that really drives me fucking wild.

I feel my release start to build, only a blip at first but quickly blooming into a deep pleasure that makes every muscle in my body go tense. Aspen senses it too, able to read my body so well already. As if giving me the go ahead, she taps my hip with her hand before her fingers dig into the bone, urging me on.

I grip the headboard with my hand, holding it as still as I can so it doesn’t bang against the wall as I ride out the intensity of my orgasm, biting back the groan of pleasure that threatens to tear from my throat as I feel Aspen tighten around my shaft and then begin to spasm, milking me with each pulse.

I collapse back down on top of her, smiling into the crook of her neck when I feel her heart beating violently against my chest.

“There, see? That didn’t take too long.” I suck her earlobe into my mouth, swirling my tongue along the soft bud. “And yet, I was still able to rock your world.” I grin, pulling back to look down at her silhouette, not able to actually see the lines of her face in the darkness of the room, though I can imagine them as plain as day.

“You don’t lack confidence. I’ll give you that.” She bucks her hips, indicating she needs to get up.

“I don’t need confidence. Your body tells me everything I need to know.”

“Is that so?” I can’t see her lips, but I can hear the smile that pulls at them.

“It is.” I lean forward, kissing the corner of her mouth before reluctantly rolling off of her, allowing her to climb from the bed. It instantly feels cold and empty without her in it. Shifting to my back, I sit up just enough to click on the lamp on the bedside table, catching Aspen with her shirt pulled halfway over her head, giving me a brief glimpse at her glorious tits before she tugs the material the rest of the way down.

“Too bright,” she hisses, squinting her eyes. If I wasn’t so enamored by the sight of her, I might have noticed the harshness of the light after hours in the dark, but my eyes have more important things to focus on.

“Some would argue it’s just bright enough.” I let my gaze drop to her bare thighs, her T-shirt barely long enough to cover her bottom half, which remains without clothes. “So, tell me the plan for tomorrow again.” I lean back against the headboard, watching her scour the floor for her bottoms, which she finds too quickly for my liking.

“We are having dinner with your parents at six.”

“And?”

“And that’s it.”

“So you’re finished with work then?”

This is information I probably should have already known, but I got in a day later than originally planned and had to take a late flight, so it was nearly ten at night when I finally arrived. After spending the first hour staring at her across the room while my mother fussed over me, all I wanted to do was pull her into my room and sink inside her. Asking her about work was the last thing on my mind.

“I am. I got the statement I needed yesterday, thanks to your brother.”

“My brother?”

“He may have pretended to be with my law firm and may or may not have intimidated Mr. Evans into cooperating.”

“Couldn’t that mess up the case? I mean, if people find out that Remi doesn’t actually work for the firm?”

“No one’s going to find out. Besides, Charles would probably be proud of my resourcefulness.”

“So what happens now?”

“No idea. I sent his statement over today. They’ll likely subpoena him as a witness. Either way, my job is done.”

“Does that mean you have to head back to D.C?”

“Not until Sunday. Laura has already booked my return flight. Figured since Remi took the whole week off, we’d make the most of it.” She tugs on her pajama bottoms. “I was going to tell you all this earlier, but you weren’t answering my calls.”

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “I had a meeting with the leasing office at my building, and that was after signing the final paperwork officially ending my work contract.”

This is the first I’m mentioning this to her, and the expression on her face makes me so glad I waited to do it in person. I was eager as fuck to get here and it nearly killed me to wait an extra day than planned, but I wanted to have all this taken care of when I got here.

“What? Why?” She presses a knee to the side of the bed like she wants to crawl back in with me but knows if she does, I likely won’t let her leave.

“I am officially unemployed and at the end of my lease. I let them know today that I won’t be extending and that I’ll be out next week.”

“Wait.” Her complexion goes pale. “You’re moving?”

I nod slowly, trying to keep my smile at bay.

“When? Where are you going?”

“Where do you think I’m going?” I give her a look that tells her she should already know the answer.

“But I thought... I thought you said it would take a while.”

“It should have, but I decided I didn’t want to wait.”

“Where are you planning on staying?”

“Well, I was hoping with y—”

“Yes!” She doesn’t let me finish. “I mean, it’s small and I don’t know how much stuff you have, but we can totally make it work.”

“I really don’t have much. Just clothing and a few personal items that are currently en route to D.C. Movers are scheduled to pick up the rest next week. It’ll be kept in storage until we get a bigger place.”

“You sent everything to my apartment?”

“Well, technically, I sent it to Remi’s because his lobby has front desk staff to receive it. I’ll pick it up from him as soon as we fly in.”

“So you’re not going back to Chicago?” She finally puts all the pieces together.

“I’m not returning to Chicago,” I confirm. “I’m flying back to D.C. with you.”

“This is really happening?” She looks almost afraid to believe it, excitement tugging at her features.

“I already told you.” I sit up just enough to snag her hand, pulling her toward me. “This is it for me. You are going to be my wife, Coop. That is, unless you’re having second thoughts.” She’s already shaking her head when I finish.

“I’m not.”

“Then I don’t see any reason to delay the move, do you?”

“None.” She throws her leg over mine, straddling my lap as her fingers move through my hair. “I can’t believe I don’t have to say goodbye to you after this.”

“If I have anything to say about it, we won’t ever spend another night apart.”

“I can’t tell you how amazing that sounds.” She leans in, kissing my mouth. “What are you going to do about work?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got some meetings lined up. There’s a ton of growth in and around D.C. Finding something shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I honestly don’t know what to say.” She looks on the verge of crying. It’s my turn to reach up and touch her.

“Say you love me.”

“I love you.” She doesn’t hesitate.

“I love you,” I repeat the sentiment.

I never thought I’d tell someone I loved them, let alone fucking mean it, but damn, I do. With every bone in my body, I love her. With every vein and artery and organ. I love her with everything that I am.

And yeah, sometimes it fucking scares the hell out of me, but living without her scares me a hell of a lot more.

“Now, who’s going to break the news to your brother?” She quickly holds a finger to the tip of her nose. “Not it.”

“Not it.” I snort. “What are we, five?”

“You’re just mad because I said it first.” She lets out a little laugh when I squeeze her side.

“I’ll talk to him, maybe tomorrow after dinner. I should probably give my parents at least one civil meal before I load my gun and open fire on my brother.”

“Don’t say that. You moving to D.C. is not equivalent to shooting someone.”

“Yeah, tell that to your buddy after I break the news that his days of having little sleepovers at my fiancée’s house are over.”

A wide smile takes over her entire face.

“What?” I can’t stop the tip of my own lips.

“You just called me your fiancée.”

“That’s what you are.”

“I know. It’s just the first time you’ve used the word.”

“Well, don’t get used to it because I don’t plan on you being my fiancée for long.”

“No?” She arches a brow.

“Nope.” I pull her forward, arching my face up so that our noses touch. “Soon you’ll be my wife.” I kiss her mouth, her chin, her cheek, her nose before eventually making it back to her mouth. “What do you have to say about that?”

“I think I like the way that sounds.” She opens up for me, allowing me to slip my tongue between her lips and taste the sweetness of her.

“You’re going to have to break that news to Remi, too.” She’s barely understandable as she speaks through the kiss.

I pull back so abruptly that before she’s even able to process my movements, I’ve got my finger on the tip of my nose.

“Not it,” I announce.

“Oh my God.” She shakes her head, eyes alight with laughter. “You ass.” I jump when she smacks my chest. “Tell you what? I’ll tell him about you moving to D.C., but when the time comes, you tell him about us getting married. Deal?”

“I can talk to him,” I insist.

“No, I think this part he needs to hear from me.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am. Just don’t do anything stupid in the meantime.”

“Me? Stupid?” I snicker.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” I slip my arm around her waist when she makes a move to leave. Like before, I have her pinned beneath me before she’s even realized what’s happened.

“I need to get back to my room.”

“Do ya now?” I tease, nipping at her bottom lip. “I think I know something you need more.”

“And what’s that?”

“Me,” I state matter-of-factly.

I can see the instant the rebuttal dies on her lips.

“That’s what I thought.” I move her hair away from her face before kissing my way down her neck.

“You know”—she arches into my touch, her voice vibrating against my lips—“we will have to sleep eventually.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” I lift my hand, palming one of her tits through the worn material of her T-shirt. “Until then, I think I’m going to enjoy doing other things.” I pinch her nipple between my thumb and forefinger, smiling when she lets out a soft moan.

I know I’ve won long before she starts removing the clothes she just put back on. If there’s one thing I never doubt, it’s that Aspen is just as desperate for me as I am for her. And fuck me if it isn’t the most intoxicating thing I’ve ever encountered.



“So, let me get this straight. You’re selling our childhood home and moving to another state?” My brother gapes at my parents in horror as if they’ve just announced they’re getting divorced. “What about me? What about all of us? This is our home too!” He drops his fork onto his plate with a clatter.

I gotta say, this isn’t my brother’s day. If he thinks *this* is news he doesn’t want to hear, I can only imagine how he’s going to feel when he learns I’m returning to D.C. with him and Aspen, this time for good.

“What about you?” My father clears his throat, his hand clasped around a glass of wine. “You moved away years ago. You all did. We don’t need a house this size anymore. And honestly, your mother and I are ready for a change.”

“We grew up here,” Remi interjects.

“And nothing will take those memories away.” My mother’s voice is soft, but her eyes say that this isn’t up for discussion.

“Well, I, for one, think it’s about time.” I lift my wine glass, clenching Aspen’s hand that’s resting on my thigh beneath the table. “To new beginnings.” I squeeze her fingers.

Aspen follows suit, raising her wine glass as well.

“Not you too, Pen.” Remi groans.

“How could I not be happy that they’re making a change that makes them happy?” She tries to reason with him. “To new beginnings,” she repeats my words, giving Remi a stern look.

“Fine,” he grumbles like a pouty child. “Too new beginnings.” He seems anything but happy about what he’s saying.

“Thank you.” My mother and father both raise their glasses and together we all drink.

“Speaking of moving...”

Aspen goes stiff next to me, her gaze cutting to the side of my face.

I know I said I’d let her talk to Remi, but I feel compelled by my parents’ announcement to make one of my own. Only, before I can get the words out, there’s a hard knock on the door, followed by the doorbell, which rings three or four times in quick succession.

“What the hell?” Remi moves to stand, but my father stops him.

“Don’t.” He shakes his head.

“Don’t what? Don’t answer the door?”

“We already know who it is.” When my mother’s gaze falls on Aspen, something heavy settles in my stomach. Something that tells me I’m not gonna like what she has to say next.

“Who?” My brother is a lot less perceptive than I am, clearly.

“Just let it be. He’ll go away eventually.”

“Who is *he*?” Remi continues. “Who will go away?”

“Harris.” It’s Aspen who speaks next, sharing a look with my mother that seems to tell her everything she needs to know.

“Harris, as in your foster brother, Harris?” I ask through gritted teeth, balling the cloth napkin in my lap as I push to stand. I look over to see my brother is also on his feet.

“He’s been showing up here on and off for months,” my father explains, the legs of his chair skidding against the floor as he pushes away from the table, prepared to intercept me and my brother before we can make it to the door.

“He’s looking for me.” Aspen’s voice is eerily calm, like the words are coming out of her mouth but her brain isn’t fully processing them.

I know there’s history there. Bad history. History that Aspen has yet to fully share. But I don’t understand why he would go out of his way to look for her, let alone show up at my parents’ house when she hasn’t lived in Ohio

for the last six years. Especially after the ass beating I handed him outside the restaurant a few months ago. Clearly, the fucker doesn't learn.

"Why?" I tense when she stands, like there's any way in hell I'm going to let her anywhere near that fucking door.

"You should already know the answer to that." Her response only serves to confuse me more.

The doorbell rings again—two then three times—and is again followed by a fist pounding against the thick, decorative glass so hard that the panes rattle against the wood frame.

"That's it." My brother takes off down the hall and despite Aspen's effort to hold me in place, I follow after him. "I'm gonna kill this motherfucker."

"You will do no such thing." My father's voice is right behind me and despite the quickness of our movements, he manages to cut us off at the door. "If you answer this door, you're only giving him what he wants," he warns, his gaze darting between me and Remi.

"He's right." Aspen appears next to me. "I know Harris. If he's here, it's because he *wants* to hurt me. Not physically, but emotionally. If you open that door, he wins."

"He's been harassing our parents looking for you, Pen." It's my brother who speaks first. "How can you expect us not to handle this?"

"You know him, Rem. Probably better than most. You know that nothing you can do here today will stop him short of putting him in the ground."

"Then we'll put him in the fucking ground." I grit my teeth so hard it's a wonder my fucking molars don't break off.

"I know you're in there..." The instant I hear his voice taunting us through the door, the red flooding my vision turns to pure crimson—the deep color of blood—which is exactly what I'm going to see when I get through that fucking door—his blood.

"Move." I turn on my father, my nostrils flaring.

"No." He stands his ground, and despite the fact that both my brother and I could easily overpower him, neither of us makes a move to do so. "I will not indulge this behavior. Whatever he hopes to accomplish by showing up here tonight, he will leave disappointed. Nothing good comes from playing his game."

"Maybe not." Remi clenches his fists at his side. "But it'll make me feel a hell of a lot better to teach him a fucking lesson."

“That’s enough.” Aspen’s voice breaks at the end. “You are not going out there.” She speaks directly to Remi before her gaze cuts to me. “Either of you. If you care about me at all, you will not open that door.”

I have to resist the urge to call her out on playing the *if you care about me* card. We want to open the door *because* we care about her, not the other way around.

“Open the door, Aspen.” *Thump, thump, thump.* The door vibrates against my father’s back.

“She isn’t here,” my father calls back.

“The police are on their way.” My mother suddenly appears, a phone pressed to her ear.

“You called the police?” Remi growls.

“Yes, just like I called them the last handful of times he’s shown up here. It’s their job, and hopefully they can catch him this time and get him the help he clearly so desperately needs.”

“Open the fucking door.” The glass panels shake under the assault of his pounding fist.

“Help? You want to help this fucking junkie?” I hitch my finger toward the door.

“He’s not stable.” My father moves to explain. “We have footage of him pacing the front yard talking to himself, pulling his own hair and even punching himself. He needs help.”

“It’s not up to you to decide what he needs. He’s a fucking junkie. He’s pulling his hair and punching himself because he’s high on whatever he shot into his arm that night,” I disagree. “No, what he needs is a bullet to the fucking head. Be doing the world a favor if you ask me.”

“It’s not for you to decide either,” Aspen interjects. “I have more reason to hate him than anyone else, and do you see me trying to run out the door to exact my revenge? No, because I am better than that. I am better than him.” Her attention moves from me to my brother and then back to me. “And so are both of you. So please, just let the police handle this.”

As if on cue, blue-and-red lights filter in through the decorative glass as at least one police cruiser pulls up outside the house.

“Pen,” my brother objects.

“Please, Remi.” She gives him a look that instantly melts his resolve.

“Okay.” He blows out a slow breath, reaching for her hand. “Okay.” He squeezes her fingers before quickly letting go. “Come on, Sut.” He tries to

coax me away from the door.

“We’re seriously just going to let this motherfucker go?” Anger and indecision split me in two, and yet, I don’t make a single move toward the door. How can I when Aspen is looking at me the way she’s looking at me right now?

It’s a staggering reminder of just how much power she has over me. I wouldn’t be able to stop myself if it were for anyone else. And yet, she is also the reason I want to rush out that fucking door and wipe that motherfucker off the face of the earth.

“We are.” My father’s hand settles on my shoulder. “The police are here now. Let me handle it from here.”

It takes every fucking ounce of resolve I have to make my feet move. Walking away from a fight has never been my strong suit and even as I follow Aspen and my brother back to the dining room, I have to forcibly resist the urge to pivot and go back the other way to finish the job I started all those months ago.

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Chapter Nine

Aspen



“Tell me what he did to you.” Sutton’s voice cuts through the haze of sleep that settles behind my eyes. I go from nearly unconscious to wide awake in a split second.

“It’s over.” I slide my hand across his stomach, readjusting my cheek on his chest. “Let’s get some sleep.”

I know his parents prefer I sleep in my own room, but after what transpired this evening, I couldn’t fathom being anywhere but right here, with Sutton.

Learning that Harris has been showing up here on and off since June, harassing Randel and Summer, was hard enough. Having to deal with the fallout with Remi and Sutton was even worse. I’m honestly surprised I was able to keep either of them from going outside and beating him to a bloody pulp. And while I wanted to let them, God did I ever, I also knew nothing good would come of it.

Harris is not someone you can just beat up and expect he’ll learn his lesson... Clearly. And while I don’t know what he hopes to accomplish by showing up here, something tells me it’s as simple as him wanting me to know he’s still here, that I haven’t gotten rid of him so easy. And while I may have stood my ground with him all those years ago, there’s a big difference between this Harris and the teenage version of him, because now he doesn’t have anything to lose, which makes him extremely dangerous and unpredictable.

I won’t lie and say I’m not shaken by the whole thing. I am. But for the first time in a very long time, I don’t feel it clouding everything else like it once would have. He doesn’t have the same power over me that he used to. Though I would sleep a hell of a lot easier tonight if the police were able to take him into custody, but unfortunately, he fled just as the cops had arrived.

“You’re going to be my wife, Coop. I need to know everything. It’s the only way I can protect you.” Sutton pulls me back to the present.

“I don’t need your protection, Sutton. I just need you.”

“And you have me. But do I have you?”

I shift, pushing myself upright to look down at his shadowed silhouette, accented only by the outside light that spills in through the cracks in the blinds.

“Why would you ask me that? After everything I’ve risked to be with you, my relationship with my best friend—”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He rolls to his side, reaching up to click on the lamp on the bedside table.

I blink into the suddenly bright light, my eyes taking a moment to refocus on Sutton as he scoots upright, resting his back against the headboard. It’s impossible not to be momentarily distracted by his bare chest and abdomen, but then I remember what we’re talking about and my attention quickly snaps back into place.

“I just meant, I want to know everything there is to know about you. I don’t want there to be a single secret between us. Not a single thing we don’t share.”

“Something tells me it would take years for you to get through your long list of dirty laundry.” I regret saying that the instant it leaves my lips.

He winces, like my words have physically wounded him, but he doesn’t let it deter him.

“You can insult me if it makes it easier for you, so long as you stop holding in whatever it is you’ve buried. I can see how it weighs you down, even when you try to pretend it doesn’t. Let me in, Aspen. Let me share the burden. Maybe then it won’t feel so heavy.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes as Sutton leans closer, taking both of my hands in his.

“You can tell me.”

“What if you can’t look at me the same once you know?” My chin quivers.

I want to tell him. I want to open up and unburden myself with this shame and guilt that I’ve carried around like a second skin, but I’m also terrified. Not even Remi knows the full truth. I’ve never said it out loud to anyone other than Jean that day in the kitchen and even then, I don’t think she

believed me. Why would she? Harris was her perfect child and I was nothing more than a paycheck from the state.

But telling Sutton means reopening wounds I haphazardly stitched years ago. And once I do, it's hard to say what it will take to close them again. Or maybe I won't need to. Maybe this time I can let them heal naturally and just know that while I may always carry the scars, they no longer define me. I am stronger because of them, not in spite of them.

"I could never look at you differently because of your past. As you just pointed out, I have a lot to be ashamed of myself. But you, whatever he did to you, whatever happened to you when you were a child, that isn't on you. You know that, right?"

It's clear he has a pretty good idea of what transpired between me and Harris just by the way he's looking at me, and while you would think that would make saying the words easier, it doesn't. Not even a little bit. If anything, it makes saying them that much more difficult.

"You're only saying that because you don't know..."

"I'm saying that because I love you. You, Aspen. And I never thought I would say that about another person. I never thought I would feel this way about another person. I can promise you there isn't anything you could say that would change that."

"Sutton... I..."

"I'm not trying to pressure you."

"No, I know." I shake my head. "I don't feel pressured. It's just..."

"Would it help if I ask questions?"

"Maybe," I admit, my stomach tight with nerves.

"Did he hit you or physically harm you?"

"Sometimes." I'm slow to admit.

"Did he... force himself on you?"

"Yes." I swallow hard.

"Did he make you do something you didn't want to?"

I can only nod, my throat suddenly so dry I'm not sure words could make it out if I tried.

"Something sexual?"

It's not a question that needs to be asked, but I appreciate him making no assumptions.

Again, I only nod.

"Did he rape you?"

“Not exactly, no.” My cheeks heat as I have trouble holding Sutton’s gaze.

“He forced you to do something to him?”

I bite my bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

I can see the wheels turning beneath his brilliant blue eyes, watching as the pieces begin clicking into place.

“He made you...” The words catch in his throat, like even he can’t say them out loud.

“He made me suck his...” I can’t finish the sentence.

His features tug in anger and realization, but he’s quick to scrub his expression, for my benefit no doubt. Though it doesn’t hurt me to see him angry. What hurts me is the way he’s looking at me now.

“How many times?” He’s careful to keep his voice soft, but there’s no mistaking the murderous anger behind his façade.

“I didn’t keep track. It was... a lot. Like a very common thing for the better part of two years.”

“That’s why you...” He doesn’t finish his thought.

“Why I freaked out when you wanted me to...”

“If I had known.”

“Don’t do that. You couldn’t have known.” I refuse to let him feel guilty for something he had no control over.

“Did he do anything else?”

“He, um, touched me sometimes. Purposely hurt me. It’s like he got off seeing me in pain.”

“Why did you never say anything while it was happening?”

“Because I was scared,” I admit. “I was afraid of what he would do to me if I said anything. And really, who would believe me anyway? It’s not like I could prove it.” I blow out a hard breath. “You probably think I’m so weak.”

“No.” He shakes his head adamantly, shifting closer. “Of course I don’t. You were a child. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you. But look at you now. I don’t think you’re weak at all, Aspen. In fact, I think you’re incredibly strong.”

“You do?”

“I do. How could I not?” He pauses for a brief moment. “The first night we slept together... You told me you needed me that night.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before things escalated. I didn’t want him to have that part of me. I didn’t want him to be my first.”

“That’s why you were at that party that night.”

“Yes.”

“That’s why you went to that room with me.”

“It is. But it isn’t at the same time. Yes, I wanted to lose my virginity because I didn’t want Harris to be able to take it from me, but *if* I could have chosen anyone to give it to, it would have been you. I’ve never regretted that you were my first.”

“And did he?” He swallows hard. “Did he...”

“No,” I’m quick to answer. “Because of you. After that night with you, I started standing up for myself. In a way, I have you to thank for that. You showed me that happiness was possible. All I had to do was fight for it. And so I did. I fought for the next two years, and you know what? I made it out of there. I’m here now, stronger because of it.”

“I’m sorry. Had I known...”

“What? You would have done things differently.”

“I don’t know.” He seems ashamed to admit.

“You saved me all those years ago. Without even realizing it. And even when I tried to convince myself I hated you for what transpired after, the truth is, the only thing I hated was that you didn’t love me back.” I squirm under his gaze. “Don’t look at me like that.” I shift uncomfortably, knotting my fingers together in my lap.

“Like what?”

“Like you pity me.”

“I don’t pity you, Aspen. I pity him and what I’m going to fucking do to him when I find him.” His voice is eerily calm, but there’s no mistaking what simmers beneath the surface. Something so thick I can practically feel it in the air.

“You’re not going to do anything,” I disagree, fighting to keep the shake from my voice.

“Like hell I’m not. He forced himself on you. He hurt you.”

“He did. But you going after him will only make it worse.”

“How will it make it worse? Don’t you want justice for what he did to you?”

“No. I just want to leave him in the past once and for all. You asked me to tell you the truth, and it took a lot to admit to you what I just did. Now please do not make me regret it.”

“Coop...”

“Please, Sutton. You wanted to know my past. This is it. Harris is only part of what I had to endure. There is so much more, so many things no child should ever have to go through, but I endured it and I found a way to overcome it. It’s not up to you to ride in on some white horse and try to save me. I don’t need to be saved. I fought my way out and the last thing I want is to let him pull me back into the darkness. So please, promise me that you will not retaliate. That you will not go after him on some misguided idea that you’re defending my honor.”

“How can you ask me to promise you that?”

“Because you said you love me.” I swipe angrily at my cheek even though not a single tear has fallen, despite that they’ve been blurring my vision since this conversation began. “Did you mean that?”

“You know I do.” His eyes soften.

“Then prove it. Do as I ask. I don’t want anyone else to know and if you go after Harris, people are going to find out.”

“Maybe they should find out.”

“That’s not your decision.” My hands shake as I fight the array of emotions building in my chest.

I knew this would be hard for him to process. It’s one of the main reasons I never told Remi, because I worried I wouldn’t be able to talk him off the ledge once he found out. I should have known Sutton would react the same way and really, how can I fault him for it knowing how I would react if someone had hurt him this way.

“Aspen.”

“Please, Sutton. Promise me. Promise me you won’t go after Harris.”

“I promise.” He finally concedes, reluctantly.

“I know this isn’t easy, but you asked for the truth.”

“I did.”

“Do you regret it now?”

“No.” He grabs my hand, tugging me toward him.

I collapse onto his chest, reveling in the warmth of his skin against my cheek.

“Your past is a part of you,” he speaks against my hair. “And there isn’t a part of you I could ever regret knowing.”

“You don’t think I’m... tainted?” I glance up at his face.

“Are you kidding me?” He shifts so abruptly that one minute I’m above him and the next I’m pinned beneath him. “No part of you is tainted. And I

will spend the rest of my life kissing away any trace that he ever laid a single finger on you, starting right now.” He silences the words that form on my lips when he presses his mouth to mine.

And while I don’t think it’s possible to ever completely erase what Harris did, Sutton’s touch is like a healing balm to my scars. Every moment I spend with him, every second, I feel more whole, more myself than I ever have before.

I spent my life running and finally, after all these years, I feel like I’ve found my way home.



“Morning.” Remi looks up from his bowl of cereal as I slide onto the stool across from him. “You slept late.”

“I had trouble falling asleep.” I grab his glass of orange juice and take a long drink, grimacing at how it tastes mixing with the mint flavor of the toothpaste that lingers on my tongue.

“You had trouble falling asleep or my brother kept you up all night?” He gives me a knowing look and for the first time, there’s no condescension to his words.

“Is there a difference?” I set his glass back in front of him.

“Are you trying to make me barf into my cheerios?”

“You’re the one who said something,” I remind him, resting my arms on the bar in front of me. “Speaking of your brother. Where is he anyway?”

“He left a little bit ago.”

“Left where?” An uncomfortable pit opens up in my stomach when last night once again becomes the focus of my thoughts.

Did he leave because he couldn’t bear to look at me once the reality of what I admitted had finally sunk in? I can’t say I’d blame him. I had a hard time looking in the mirror for a long time because all I saw looking back at me was a disgusting shell that was used over and over again in various ways. A broken toy no one actually wanted.

I still can’t believe I told him. I can’t believe I opened my mouth and the words actually came out. I wasn’t sure I’d ever say those words out loud and

while sharing my past with Sutton was hard, I can't deny I feel relieved knowing it's out there.

I just hope he hasn't changed his mind. Sometimes you see things more clearly in the light of day. What if he woke up this morning and realized he couldn't do this?

No, he wouldn't do that. I quickly shake the thought away.

"Not sure." Remi shovels a bite of cereal into his mouth. "Said he had some things to take care of," he speaks around a mouthful of food, milk spilling out the side of his mouth, which he quickly wipes away with the back of his hand.

My nerves settle slightly, remembering that he did tell me a couple of days ago that he had some things to take care of while he was in town, though he didn't say what they were.

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

"I didn't realize you'd be expecting a full report. Otherwise, I would have asked. And furthermore, why is it he didn't tell you where he was going and when he'd be back? Too busy filling you with cum?" He grimaces at his own words.

"Remi." I give him a disgusted look.

"Sorry. Force of habit. You know I can't control it." He shrugs a single shoulder.

"You are king of the dirty mouths," I agree. "So, Sutton is... out. Where are your mom and dad?"

"Also out. Apparently, everyone has something to do today."

"What about you? Do you have any plans for the day?"

"You mean besides forcing you to go to the mall with me?"

"The mall?" I arch a brow. "Why would you want to go to the mall?"

"Because, in case you haven't noticed, I didn't react very well to the news of my parents selling their home. Thought maybe I would go pick up some of those cinnamon bun things my mom loves so much in a way of apology and congratulations."

"Does this mean you're okay with it then?"

"Hell no." He pushes his half-eaten bowl of cereal toward me. I pick up the spoon and shovel a bite into my mouth, crinkling my nose.

"It's soggy."

"Then don't eat it." He takes the bowl back, acting like I've just insulted him personally.

“No, I want it.” I press up on my elbows to give myself enough leverage to attempt to scoop another bite, only he realizes my play and quickly pulls the bowl out of my reach. “Hey!” I pout out my bottom lip for dramatic effect.

“Give me my spoon.”

“Not until you give me another bite.” I give him a cheeky grin. “Please.”

“Fine. But only because I love you.” He scoots the bowl back in my direction. This time when I take a bite, I moan appreciatively as I chew. “So good.” I nod in approval.

“Shut up.” He shakes his head, his blond strands brushing across his forehead as he does.

“You need a haircut.” I use the spoon to point at his hair before shoveling another bite into my mouth.

“I’m growing it out. Thinking maybe I’ll try out a man bun.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.” I drop the spoon into the bowl before pushing it back across the bar to Remi.

“I am.” He snorts out a laugh. “Though the fact that you clearly don’t think I’d look good with a man bun is a bit insulting.”

“Does anyone look good with a man bun?”

“Some people do,” he argues. “I bet you’d think Sutton would look good with one.”

The image of Sutton with his dark locks twisted into a bun flashes in front of my eyes.

“Oh my God, you do think he’d look good in one.” Remi crosses his arms in front of himself.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. Your face gave you away.”

“You’re crazy.” My shoulders shake with laughter.

“Now you have to go to the mall with me.”

“I *have* to?”

“Yes, because you insulted me.”

“I did not insult you.”

“You did. And now you have to make it up to me.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.” He pushes to a stand. “You done with this?” He gestures to the bowl.

“Yeah. If we’re getting cinnamon buns, I want to save my appetite.”

“That’s my girl.” He turns, depositing the bowl and cup into the sink.

“Like you would have let me get out of it.” I stand as well, pushing in my stool.

“Fair.” He flashes me his pearly whites. “How long until you’re ready?”

“What?” I gesture to my oversized sweater and leggings. “Don’t I look ready?”

“Stunning, as always.” He rounds the bar toward me.

“I do need to grab my phone and purse. Meet you back here in a minute?”

“Sounds like a plan.” He lands a smack to my backside as I pass him.

“Remi!” I yelp.

“Sorry, what was it I said about old habits?” He feigns innocence.

“Uh-huh.” I roll my eyes at him. “Just don’t let your brother see you do that. He might kill us both.”

“You mean he’d kill me,” he corrects.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” I stick my tongue out, turning before quickly heading down the hallway and up the stairs.

Hopeful that Sutton texted me to tell me where he went, I head straight for my phone on the nightstand when I enter his bedroom. Unfortunately, when I reach it, I see that I have no new calls or texts. Pulling up our text thread, I send him a quick message.

Me: Just checking in to see where you are. You didn’t mention you were leaving.

I wait a few moments, gathering my things before firing off another message.

Me: Remi is dragging me to the mall. If you get home before we do, call me. Otherwise I guess I’ll just see you when you get back.

Shoving my phone into my purse, I immediately pull it back out when it pings with an incoming message.

Sutton: Sorry, I didn’t want to wake you. Had some stuff to take care of before we head home.

Home... My heart rate kicks up speed. Such a simple word and yet it makes me so happy I feel like I could seriously just float away on a freaking cloud.

How many times have I thought about this? Wished for it? But in all the years I harbored feelings for Sutton, I never truly believed it would actually happen. But it is. We’re together. He’s moving to D.C. with me. We’re really doing this.

I didn't know it was possible to feel this way—so deliriously happy. But I am. The road here wasn't easy or conventional, but I wouldn't want to end up anywhere else than where I am right now.

All those years of suffering, all the things I had to go through to get here, I wouldn't have believed it at the time, but it suddenly feels worth it. Like I had to go through all the bad stuff to be able to truly appreciate the good.

The McKinneys gave me more than just pain and suffering. They also unknowingly led me to the two most important people in my life. Two men I would burn the world for. And for that, I'll never not be grateful.

Sutton: *Maybe today wouldn't be a bad time to break the news to my brother. Unless you've decided you want me to do it after all.*

Shit. Right. Because we still haven't told Remi that Sutton is moving in with me. And while I have no doubt he was seconds away from announcing it last night before Harris showed up, I'm glad he wasn't able to. I mean, I'm not glad that Harris showed up or that he's been harassing Summer and Randel. But I am glad that he wasn't able to make the announcement in front of everyone. Remi deserves to hear it from me first. I owe him that much.

Me: *No, it should come from me. I'll talk to him today.*

His response is instant.

Sutton: *I love you.*

Me: *I love you.*

I smile, tucking my phone back into my purse before heading downstairs to find Remi already in the foyer, waiting on me.

“Ready?” He rocks back on his heels.

“Yep.” I slip on my shoes before following him out the door.

“Keys.” He holds his hand out to me as we make our way down the sidewalk.

“You know you can't drive the rental.” I shake my head, crossing around the front of the car.

“Worth a shot.” He chuckles, tugging open the passenger door before climbing inside.



“I forgot how good these things are.” I slide the straw past my lips and take another sip of blue raspberry Icee.

“Right?” Remi agrees with an enthusiastic nod, taking a long pull of his own Icee.

“I don’t think I’ve had one of these since the last time we came here,” I realize out loud. “God, that has to have been, what, eight years ago?”

“Six, remember? Senior prom dress shopping.”

“That’s right.” I stretch my feet out in front of myself, relaxing back on the bench as I watch an array of people pass where we’re sitting, keeping an eye out for Harris.

I know it’s not necessary. We’re nearly an hour from Wilmington and the mall was never his scene. So unless he followed us here, which is unlikely considering he probably doesn’t have a car, I really have no reason to worry. And yet, last night has put me on edge and I can’t help it.

“You had to have tried on fifty dresses that day. I didn’t think you were ever going to pick one.” Remi pulls my attention back to the conversation at hand.

“Dress shopping is serious business.” I knock my arm against his.

“I guess it is.” He takes another sip of his drink. “So, I wanted to ask you earlier, but I wasn’t sure if I should bring it up…”

“You want to know how I’m doing after Harris showed up last night?” I guess.

He nods slowly. “You held it together in the moment, but I assumed it hit you later. It was weird… You not coming to me. I’ve always been the person you come to when things like that happen, but you didn’t.”

“I know.” I take his free hand with my own, squeezing his fingers. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t like being on the outside of your life.”

“Hey.” I shift toward him. “You are not outside of my life. How could you be when you’re such a vital part of it?”

“I’ve never had to share you before. I have to admit, I don’t like it very much.”

His words make what I have to tell him so much harder.

“Remi—”

“So how are you, really?” He cuts me off before I can continue.

“I’m okay.” I blow out a puff of air. “I feel really bad for your parents. It’s not fair that they have to deal with this.”

“It isn’t your fault.”

“It sure feels like it is.”

“My parents love you. You know that. They’ll protect you as one of their own. Besides, my dad is tougher than he looks. Harris goes further than beating on a door and I have no doubt my father will teach him a lesson he won’t soon forget. Don’t worry about them. Besides, depending on how quickly this moving plan comes into play, it may not be a factor for that much longer anyway.”

“I guess.” I nod slowly. “I talked to Sutton about... my past and Harris and everything. It helped.”

“So he knows everything, then?” His knee brushes mine.

“For the most part. I didn’t give too many details, but he knows the important parts.”

“Do I?”

“Rem...”

“I don’t need you to tell me what happened. I know enough to know it wasn’t good.”

“One day, I’m going to tell you everything,” I promise, knowing now is not the time nor the place. “Just know that I’m okay and that Harris can’t hurt me anymore. I just wish I could wipe him off the face of this earth so he can’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“Careful, Pen. Sounds a lot like you’re saying you’d like him dead.”

“Maybe I do.” I shrug, giving myself a moment to really consider what that would feel like. Sure, I’d be relieved. But would it make me feel any better, truly? I can’t say it would.

“It’s okay to want him dead. After everything he and his parents put you through, you have every right to feel that way.”

“Weirdly, I don’t. I just don’t want him to hurt another person the way he hurt me. In a way, I kind of feel bad for him.”

“Come again?” He gapes openly at me.

“It couldn’t have been easy being the only child of Rick and Jean McKinney. I mean, sure, they saved their wrath for me, but what was it like for him before I got there? Someone had to teach him to be this way, right? It can’t be all his fault.”

“At some point, you have to stop blaming the upbringing and start blaming the person. You grew up in that house. Maybe not as long as he did,

but you were there, taking the brunt of their treatment, and look at how you turned out.”

“Some days I think not very well.” I snort.

“Not many people would have the strength to face what you have faced and come out on the other end unscathed.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m unscathed.”

“But you know what I mean.”

“I do.” I lean against him, pressing my shoulder to his.

“I’m proud of you, Pen. For surviving. For thriving. For everything you’ve accomplished. You are the most stubborn person I have ever met, and I mean that in the best fucking way possible.” That boyish grin I love so much graces his handsome face.

It’s strange to think that just a few weeks ago we were in this weird place where I wasn’t sure where we stood. Were we friends? Were we more than friends? And as much as I tried to convince myself that I could love Remi that way, I now know without a doubt that I couldn’t have. Because the way I love him runs so much deeper. He is everywhere. A part of my very soul. A part of me. Some things are just bigger than love. Some things are engrained in every fiber of our bodies. Remi and I are connected in a way that can never be taken away. For as cheesy as it sounds, he completes me.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you,” I tell him.

“I don’t think that’s true. You’ve always been stronger than you’ve given yourself credit for.”

“You are my strength, Remi. You always have been.”

“Fuck, Pen. Are you trying to make me cry?” He pulls his hand from mine, dramatically wiping away non-existent tears.

“Speaking of making you cry, there *is* something I need to tell you.”

“Uh-oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You might be angry at first, but I think you’ll warm up to the idea.”

“Fuck me, you’re pregnant.” He groans loudly.

“What?” I smack his stomach. “No. Why would you say that?”

“It’s the first thing that popped into my head.”

“Don’t say things like that. That would be awful.” I flatten my palm to my chest, mentally trying to calculate my last period, which I quickly realize was just a couple of weeks ago. Many things may have changed in my life as of late, but my desire to not have children is not one of them.

Then again, I can't deny that having a little blue-eyed boy running around with Sutton's dark hair and wicked grin wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

I quickly shake the thought away.

Nope. Definitely not going there.

"So you're not sure?" Remi misreads my silence.

"No, of course I am."

"Pen?" He shifts nervously next to me.

"I'm not pregnant."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure. That's not what I needed to talk to you about."

"Then what is it?"

"Don't freak out, okay?"

"You can't lead with that because I'm already freaking out."

"It's not a bad thing. I mean, I think eventually you'll realize it's not." I grimace at his expression. "Sutton is moving in with me," I blurt so quickly the words run together, physically bracing for his reaction.

"I'm sorry, what? You spoke so fast I couldn't catch that. It sounded a lot like you said Sutton is moving in with you, but I know I must have misheard because you guys have only been together like five minutes and even you aren't that stupid."

I draw back from the sting of his words.

"Pen, please don't tell me you're that stupid."

"Why is me and Sutton moving in together stupid?"

"Refer to my previous statement. You guys have barely spent any real time together. You've been dating what, a few days. What if you move in together and you realize you don't like him as much as you thought? I've lived with Sutton, remember? He has a way of grating on a person."

"That's not going to happen." I snort out a small laugh. "I get what you're saying, I do. But I know what I want, Rem."

"And he's it?" he asks, like he just needs to be sure.

"He is. I know it's soon and probably not something you were prepared for, and I'm sorry for that, but I love him and I don't want to be without him anymore."

"I just..." He blows out a slow breath. "I was just getting used to the idea of you two dating. Now you're telling me you're going to be living together."

I already feel like he's taken so much of you away. With him in D.C., I'll never get to spend any time with you."

"That's not true." I set my Icee on the floor next to me before pivoting more fully toward him, draping my arm over the back of the bench. "We will still meet for lunch and have movie nights and all the other things we do."

"If you think Sutton is moving to D.C. to let you spend every day with me, you're sorely mistaken. He's more possessive than I am, and that's saying something." His shoulders sag. "No, he's going to move in with you and everything is going to be different."

"I mean, yeah, it'll be different, but that doesn't mean it will be bad. So maybe Sutton will tag along with us sometimes. And yeah, he'll be at the apartment if you come over for dinner or a movie, but we'll still be us. You know that, right? Nothing will change the fact that you are my best friend. You will always be a huge part of my life."

"A huge part," he murmurs, more to himself than to me.

"What?"

"You said a huge part. But I'm used to being your whole life, not just a part of it. I don't want things to change. I want to rewind back to summer and stop you from getting on that plane with me."

"Remi."

"It's a selfish thing to say, I know. But everything is so different and I just feel... I just feel like I can't get my footing. As soon as I think maybe I'm back on solid ground, something else happens."

"Is Sutton moving in with me really that world-altering?" I ask genuinely because I don't know if he's being dramatic or if he really thinks it's a terrible idea.

"Sure feels like it," he grumbles.

"Now you're just being difficult to be difficult. You don't know what's going to happen. Sure, things will be different, but we'll just have to find a new normal. Who knows, maybe you'll meet someone in the future and we can double date like every other day." I give him a reassuring smile.

"Unlikely."

"Unlikely because you don't *want* to meet someone?"

"Unlikely because you're already taken."

"Rem, we've been through this."

"I know. I know. Still doesn't mean I don't hate that you chose *him*."

“I chose both of you. And if I remember right, it was *you* who brought Sutton back into my life.”

“Don’t remind me.” He scrubs a hand down his face.

“And you’re wrong. You will find someone. And between you and me, your brother thinks you’ve got a thing for Olivia.”

“I don’t.” He shakes his head adamantly. “I mean, she’s hot, but you know my rule. I don’t want my brother’s seconds.”

“But you wanted me,” I say, trying not to be offended by how he says seconds, like sleeping with Sutton somehow makes a person less than they were before.

“That’s different. You were mine first.”

I resist pointing out that I wasn’t actually his first. At least not in that way. But saying so won’t solve anything, so I keep the thought to myself.

“Okay, so if not Olivia, someone else then. What about that cute little redhead you’re always checking out every time we go for coffee. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you look at her.”

“Yeah, because I’m trying to figure out if I’ve fucked her already.”

“Remi.” I smack his shoulder.

“What?” A deep chuckle vibrates his shoulders. “Sometimes it’s hard to keep track.”

“You’re awful.”

“Awfully amazing.” He smirks.

“I don’t know if I’d say amazing when you just admitted to not being able to keep track of who you have and haven’t slept with.”

“What can I say? I drank a lot in college.”

“You did more than just drink,” I mutter under my breath loud enough for him to hear.

“Exactly my point. I can’t help that everyone wants a piece of this.” He gestures to himself.

“On that note.” I shake my head, holding in my laughter. “Are you about ready?”

“Almost. I still haven’t gotten what I came here for.”

“Right. The cinnamon buns.” I remember, having completely forgotten.

“So, when is Sutton moving in with you?” he asks, pushing to a stand. “I need time to mentally prepare myself. I might even go through a mourning period, which means I’ll need my best friend there to help me through it.”

“Actually, he’s coming home with us, like Sunday.”

“What?” He blanches. “That soon?”

“He, um... He already had all his stuff delivered to your building.”

“My building?”

“My building doesn’t have the lobby staff, so he had it sent to yours instead.”

“Of course, why wouldn’t he inconvenience me more. First, he steals my girl. Now, he’s taking over *my* lobby.”

“He didn’t steal me. I’m right here, aren’t I?” I lean down and pick up my Icee before slipping my arm through his. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

“You say that now.” He leads us toward the back of the mall where the food court is.

“I’ll say that always. Because you’re forgetting one very important detail. You’re just as important to me as I am to you. Sutton living with me isn’t going to change that.”

I almost tell him that I’ve also agreed to marry Sutton but decide now isn’t the best time. Maybe after Sutton’s been in D.C. a few weeks and things have settled down. I’m not trying to send my poor friend into cardiac arrest. Besides, agreeing to marry Sutton and actually doing it are two very different things. It could be years before it actually happens. Maybe best to lighten the load on Remi the best I can.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.” I knock my hip into his. “Now, let’s get these damn cinnamon rolls and get the hell out of here. I think I’ve had my fill of the mall for another six years.”

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Chapter Ten

Remi



“Why are you calling me?” Are the first words out of my mouth after I see my brother’s name flash across the screen of my phone.

“Rem, I need your help.”

“What? Where the fuck are you?” I sit up straighter on the couch, unease settling in the pit of my stomach at the strange tone of his voice.

“Is Aspen with you?” He doesn’t answer my question, asking one of his own instead.

“She went upstairs to take a shower. Where the fuck are you?” I ask again. “She was expecting you home hours ago.”

“I’m in the garage. I need your help.”

“What do you mean you’re in the garage? Why the fuck are you calling me then?”

“Fuck, Rem, can you just listen to me for two seconds? I need you to go upstairs and grab me a change of clothes and meet me in the garage.”

“Why?” I don’t try to hide my confusion.

“Can you just fucking do what I ask, please? Go upstairs, get me a change of clothes out of my room, and meet me in the garage,” he repeats. “And please, don’t tell Aspen I’m here.”

“Sutton... I—”

“Just do it, Rem. Please.” There’s a panic in his voice that I can’t say I’ve ever heard before and it’s for this reason that I push to a stand, preparing to do as he asks.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll fucking do it,” I grumble. “But you can at least tell me why?” I wait for a long moment before realizing the motherfucker hung up on me.

“Everything okay?” I nearly run straight into my father as I round the corner of the hallway.

“Yeah, just gotta run up and grab something from upstairs. What are you doing?”

“Your mom asked me to get her some crackers out of the kitchen.”

“She still not feeling well?”

“No, I think maybe the sushi gave her food poisoning.”

“That’s why you don’t eat raw fish.” I snort.

“Tell that to your mother. You know she loves that stuff.”

“Maybe not so much after today.”

“Maybe not,” he agrees.

“Well, I’ll let you get to it.” I turn, waiting until he disappears into the kitchen before jogging up the stairs.

“Rem!” Aspen startles in the doorway of the bathroom when she opens the door just as I’m slipping past.

If it weren’t for the fact that I’m on a secret mission from my brother, I might take a moment to appreciate the sight of her wrapped in nothing more than a bath towel.

Fuck—brother’s girl, Remi, focus.

“Sorry, gotta check something in Sutton’s room.” I’ve already moved past her.

“Is he back?” she asks my back when I shove open his door.

“Not yet. He called me to ask if I’d check and see if he has any deodorant.” I spout out a bullshit lie on the fly. “Because I’m his fucking errand boy now apparently.”

“I can check for him.” She offers.

“No need. Go get dressed.” I slip inside his room, waiting until I hear the door to the guest bedroom open and close before grabbing his duffel off the floor and quickly rummaging through it.

Finding a pair of athletic pants and a tee, I drape them over my forearm before peeking my head out into the hallway to make sure the coast is clear.

I have no idea why I’m helping my brother or why he needs my help for that matter, and yet here I am, doing his bidding like I did countless times as a kid even though he treated me more like a nuisance than a brother.

Taking the stairs so fast I lose my footing and end up slipping down the last two, I quickly right myself. Thankfully, my dad is no longer in the kitchen as I enter, so I don’t have to answer any questions as I slip into the laundry room and unlock the door, slipping out into the garage.

“Sut?” I call out, careful not to be too loud. “Sut, you out here?”

“I’m right here.” I hear him hiss, seconds before he emerges from behind my father’s car where he was hunkered down.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask, taking the stairs down to the ground level, my steps faltering when I reach the bottom and my brother steps fully into view. My eyes hone in on the blood staining the front of his light-colored jacket. “Sutton?” I move toward him. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine. It’s not my blood.”

“What the fuck do you mean it’s not your blood?” I take a moment to really look at him. His hair is a mess and his face is flushed, but there doesn’t appear to be a single scratch on him.

“The less you know, the better.” He quickly slips off his jacket before tugging his T-shirt over his head. “Where is everyone?” He kicks off his shoes before working the button of his jeans. Within seconds, he’s standing in nothing but boxers. “Here.” He gestures to the clothing draped over my arm.

“Right.” I shake my head, extending him a clean shirt.

“Where is everyone?” he asks again, quickly slipping on the fresh garment before reaching for the clean pants.

“Um, Mom and Dad are in their room. Mom isn’t feeling well. Aspen just got out of the shower. When I came down, she was in the guest room, but she’ll probably be coming downstairs soon. Now, are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on? Because I’m imaging some pretty fucked-up shit right about now.”

“I already told you. The less you know, the better.” He leans down, inspecting his shoes. “Fuck. I need a bag.”

“Dad keeps extra trash bags on the shelf.” I gesture to my father’s work area on the other side of the garage.

“That’ll work.” He looks up at me expectantly.

“Yeah, so I guess I’ll go get one then.” I huff. “You know”—I turn, dipping around the car before grabbing a bag off the shelf where they sit plainly in view—“for someone who doesn’t want to implicate me in whatever the fuck is going on, you’re certainly not opposed to making me an accessory after the fact.” I toss the bag to him as I reclaim my original spot next to the door that leads inside.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what else to do and I couldn’t very well walk into the house covered in blood, now could I?” He fans out the trash bag

before haphazardly shoving his bloody clothes and even his shoes into the bag.

“Tell me what you did?”

“I can’t.”

“Sutton.”

“Rem, please.”

I look down, realizing I was wrong about him not having a scratch on him. His hands look like they’ve been forced through a fucking meat grinder. His knuckles are cracked and busted open, the wounds only now beginning to scab.

“Harris.” The realization hits me like a bat to the stomach, knocking the wind from my lungs. “Aspen said she told you... Fuck. You went after him.”

“I did what needed to be done.” He quickly ties the trash bag.

“What does that mean exactly? What needed to be done?”

“We should get inside.”

“Sutton, what the fuck did you do?” My voice shoots up, panic sliding through my shoulders.

“Do you know what he did to her? The things he made her do...” He swallows hard like he’s trying to fight the bile from sliding up his throat.

“I don’t know the details,” I admit. “But yes, I know something happened.”

“And yet you did nothing.” His nostrils flare in anger.

“What would you have had me do? I didn’t know anything for sure, only that I suspected.”

“You suspected.” He practically growls. “So clearly you knew something and yet, you didn’t protect her. You didn’t stop him from hurting her. What I did, it’s on you too, Brother.” The anger behind his eyes is enough to make even me take a step back.

“I did more for her than you ever could. You have no idea the things we’ve been through together. Fuck you if you think I didn’t protect her. I did everything I knew how to do. I was a fucking kid, too.”

“Well, clearly your everything wasn’t enough because he’s still here. He’s still forcing himself into her life just like he forced himself on her for years.”

“What did she tell you?” I feel every ounce of color drain from my face. I never wanted to imagine the things he may have done, but looking at my brother now, I think my worst fear just became a staggering reality.

“She told me enough to know that justice was long overdue.”

“What did you do?” I step closer to my brother, meeting his hard gaze.

“I already told you. What needed to be done.” He gathers the bag in his fist and dips under the half-open garage door, reappearing a few seconds later, having tossed the bag in the garbage can my parents keep next to the side of the house. “I need you to go inside and run interference. If I walk in like this, she’s going to wonder where my shoes and jacket are. I need time to at least pretend I’ve taken them off.”

“Why did you just throw your stuff away?”

“I don’t think I could have gotten the blood out in the wash and burning it doesn’t really seem like a feasible option right now. I can’t leave it out there for long, but for now, it’s the best I’ve got.”

“Burning it? Sutton, did you... Is Harris dead?” I swallow past the knot in my throat that feels like it’s the size of a baseball.

“I don’t know.” He blows out a slow breath.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” My voice shakes.

“I’ve already said too much. Go inside. Keep everyone away from the kitchen. Buy me time, please. She can’t see me like this.”

“You can’t keep this from her.”

“I can and I will, and so will you. If the cops come looking for me, she can’t be involved.”

“Do you think they will? Come looking for you, I mean?”

“I guess that depends on whether he lives or dies.”

“Sutton... You have to tell her.”

“I don’t and I won’t. She’s been through enough.”

“She has. Which is exactly why you have to tell her. This affects her more than anyone else. If you end up in jail, what do you think that will do to her? If you have to go to court and what happened to her comes out, how do you think that will affect her? Did you even think about her?”

“Of course I did. She’s the fucking reason I spent all day searching for that piece of shit.”

“No, that was for you, not Aspen. She wouldn’t have wanted you to go after him. In fact, I’m betting she specifically asked you not to. And yet, you did what you always do, what *you* wanted. What benefits *you*. Here I thought you were different. Turns out, you’re the same selfish asshole you’ve always been.”

“What would you have had me do? Nothing?” His voice spikes in anger. “Sit back like you have and let that motherfucker continue to torment her? He’s even resorted to harassing our parents, Rem. I couldn’t just sit back and let him get away with it.”

“He wouldn’t have gotten away with it forever. Eventually, he would have taken it too far and landed himself in jail.”

“So what, you just wanted me to wait around until he could do real damage to the people we love? Fuck that.”

“She’s not going to forgive you for this, you know. You think you know her. You think you understand her. But you don’t know a fucking thing.” I shake my head.

“I know her better than you think.”

“You don’t. Because if you did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. You’re on your own. I’m not taking the fall with you on this one, Brother.”

“Please, Rem.” The look he gives me stops me from turning away. “I know I’m a shit brother and I have hurt you, a lot. But I’m asking you. Please, if not for me then for Aspen. Please help me.”

I want to say no. I want to spit in his face and tell him to go fuck himself. But I also know I won’t. It doesn’t matter what he’s done. It doesn’t matter that he stole the only woman I’ve ever loved right out from underneath me. It doesn’t matter that he’s lied and manipulated us all to get what he wants. All that matters is Pen, and what this will do to her if she finds out. Though I should probably say when, because I don’t know how she won’t.

“Okay.” I finally concede, and without another word, I turn, disappearing back inside the house.

It feels like rocks have filled my stomach, weighing down every step I take as I make my way through the laundry room and back out into the kitchen.

“There you are.” Aspen appears from the hallway, her damp hair leaving wet spots on the front of her white T-shirt. “Where did you go?”

“Sorry, I had to take the trash out for my dad.” I lie with ease, though I’m not sure how given the nervous energy pulsating through my body at the current moment.

“How’s your mom?”

“Still not feeling well. Dad thinks she has food poisoning.”

“Oh no, that’s awful.” She pouts out her lower lip.

“So I was thinking. Why don’t we go upstairs and hang out until Sutton gets back? Give my mom some quiet.” I gesture to the other side of the room where a small hallway leads to the first-floor master suite.

“Okay, yeah.”

I blow out a slow breath when she turns and quietly makes her way up the stairs without taking even a second to question my motives. She trusts me and here I am lying to her about something that could implode all of our lives if Sutton really did kill Harris.

There’s no way he’ll get away with it. I can’t even wrap my head around what he was fucking thinking. Then again, this is Sutton we’re talking about. He’s notorious for doing shit without thinking it all the way through, consequences be damned.

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Chapter Eleven

Aspen



“Why would you want to watch *that* movie?” I laugh, shaking my head in a profound *no* when Remi holds up *Dazed and Confused*.

“Oh, come on, it’s a classic.”

“Classically bad maybe.” I snort, glancing at the clock on the bedside table, my mind drifting back to Sutton for the hundredth time today. He’s been gone for hours, and while Remi claims to have just spoken to him—about deodorant of all things—it still doesn’t explain why he hasn’t answered any of my text messages since this afternoon.

Something is off. Call it intuition or whatever you want, but I can quite literally feel it in my bones that something isn’t right.

“I take offense to that.” Remi gasps dramatically.

“Why? You didn’t make the movie.”

“No, but I love it like I made it.”

“Whatever, just play the stupid thing.” I finally concede.

“Really?” His handsome face lights up with a ridiculous smile.

“Well, do it already before I change my mind.” I gesture to the small television set up on his desk, which he quickly turns toward, feeding the Blu-ray into the player. “You know, no one watches discs anymore.”

“Bullshit,” Remi disagrees. “Streaming has nothing on the crisp picture of a Blu-ray movie.”

“I don’t know if that’s true.” I shake my head, finding a comfortable position against the wall as my feet hang over the side of Remi’s bed.

“Streaming is always so glitchy.”

“That’s your internet, cheapskate.” I shove him playfully when he flops down next to me.

“How dare you!” He acts like I just insulted his looks or something.

“Are you telling me I’m wrong?” I cock my head to the side as I look over my shoulder at him.

“Okay, maybe not entirely.”

“Thank you!” I nod triumphantly.

“Shut up and watch the movie.” He holds up the remote, bypassing the previews to get to the main menu.

“You know, streaming doesn’t have previews.” I continue to poke fun at him.

“Another word, and you will be disinvited from watching this movie with me.”

“And what a shame that would be,” I deadpan.

“Fine.” He moves to sit up, but I quickly pull him back down by his bicep.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding. Not another word.” I draw an X over my heart.

Without a word, he relaxes back beside me, pressing play on the remote.

We’re less than ten minutes into the movie when I feel my eyelids start to grow heavy. Despite Remi laughing and snorting every five seconds at what’s happening on screen, I feel the lack of sleep from last night starting to catch up to me.

I don’t know when exactly I doze off, or how long I slept, only that when I wake, it’s to Remi’s hushed tone.

“Just leave her here.” I hear him say, though I still haven’t found the strength to open my eyes.

“There isn’t a chance in hell I’m going to leave her in here with you.”

My skin pricks at the sound of Sutton’s voice and even though I want to throw myself upright and leap into his arms, I’m too tired, and maybe too curious, to do so.

“You say that like I’m going to try and fuck her or something,” Remi fires back, irritation in his tone.

“I don’t think that. But she’s my girl, Rem. How would you feel if the shoe were on the other foot?”

“It’d be different if she was just *your* girlfriend, but she’s *my* best friend. Has been for a hell of a lot longer than you’ve been in her life. And she’s slept in my bed hundreds of times over the years. It’s seriously not a big deal. Just let her sleep.”

“I will, in my bed.” I hear the floor creak as someone moves, followed by the sway of the mattress as I assume Remi climbs to his feet.

“I think after what you did today, you can give her tonight.”

My stomach drops, like suddenly being filled with large boulders.

“Don’t,” Sutton warns.

“Don’t what? Point out that your actions have consequences that affect more than just you?”

“I’ve got it under control.”

“Do you? Because from where I’m standing, it sure as fuck doesn’t look like it.”

“Rem, it’s been a long day. Can we please not do this?”

“Leave her here.”

“No.”

“Would you two stop,” I grumble, growing tired of their pissing match.

“We didn’t mean to wake you.”

My eyes flutter open, landing on Sutton, who stands just at the edge of the bed, his hair still wet from the shower.

“Where have you been?” I force myself upright.

“Sorry, I had a lot of things to get done before...”

“He knows,” I interject. “That you’re moving in with me,” I say, assuming that’s what he’s keeping himself from saying.

“Right. Well, I had a lot of things to get done before I officially move to D.C. Took longer than I expected and when I got home, you were asleep, so I decided to take a shower and let you rest.”

“I tried to tell him to just let you sleep here tonight.”

I glance over to find Remi standing just to my left, his hands shoved in the front pockets of his sweats.

“That’s okay.” I push myself into a stand, my brain still heavy with sleep. “What did you mean, when you said what he did today?” I ask my best friend directly.

His expression gives him away, though he’s quick to scrub it clean.

“Nothing. Just some bullshit between us.” He lies straight to my face. I’m sure of it.

“Then why did you say it affected me?”

“Because I turned down a job today and he believes it was irresponsible.” Sutton is the first to respond.

“And irrational,” Remi interjects.

“You turned down a job?” I turn back to Sutton.

“The schedule was too demanding for the salary they were offering.”

“So you two have already spoken about you moving to D.C.?” I look between the two brothers, trying to figure out why it feels like they’re coming up with this on the fly.

“I spoke with him when he got home, after you fell asleep,” Remi explains.

“What job?” I again look back at Sutton, for some reason unable to let this go. “You didn’t mention anything.”

“I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

“But you’re already moving to D.C.”

“You’re right. It was stupid. I should have told you about it.” He shifts his weight uncomfortably. “I just really hoped I’d have something lined up before we got there.”

“But you said you were okay for a while, financially, I mean.”

“I am. Was just hoping to be more settled.” He runs a hand through his hair, causing droplets of water still clinging to the damp strands to pepper the shoulders of his gray T-shirt. “You ready to go to bed? You look absolutely gassed,” he says before I can press further.

“Is that your way of saying I look like shit?” I grumble.

“You could never look like shit.” He grins, stepping forward to tug me into his chest.

I can’t shake the feeling that what they’re telling me isn’t the truth, but once the fresh scent of his skin hits my nose, all I want to do is curl up into bed and lose myself in the smell. I’m tired. So very tired. So much so that it feels almost impossible to reopen my eyes when Remi’s curt tone cuts through the space.

“On that note, you can get out now.”

“With pleasure, Brother.” Sutton shifts, sliding an arm around my shoulder before leading me through the open doorway and into the hallway.

“Night, Remi. I love you,” I murmur.

“Love you, too.” I hear him say, though it’s so faint I almost miss it.



I wake with a start, the strangest dream still heavy on my mind as my eyes flutter open. It's still dim in the room. Not pitch-black but dark enough that I know the sun has only just begun to rise.

Rolling to my side, I smile at the sight of Sutton sleeping peacefully next to me, his lips slightly parted as he breathes. The remnant dream fades the longer I look at him. I don't remember much, only that I was running from something I couldn't see but I knew I had to escape. Only, the faster I tried to run, the slower it felt like my feet were moving.

"Mornin', Coop."

I don't realize Sutton's eyes have opened until his voice, still thick with sleep, hits my ears.

I meet his gaze in the dimness of the room.

"Good morning." I smooth my hand over the back of his, not missing the way he flinches as my fingers slide over rough patches of skin and scabs. "What the..." I pull back slightly but can't make out his hand hidden in shadows.

"I fell coming up the stairs last night and scraped it up pretty good." Sutton is quick to explain as he rolls onto his back, tucking both hands behind his head as he looks up at the ceiling.

"You fell coming up the stairs..." I stare at the side of his face, having never seen Sutton so much as stumble before. He's the most graceful person I've ever met, his movements so fluid, it's like there's water beneath his feet.

"I had my hands full and missed the top step completely." He laughs at himself, but it lacks any sound of real humor.

The conversation between Remi and Sutton last night boils back to the surface, along with the feeling that for some reason, the two of them were hiding something from me.

I open my mouth to question him on it again, when a hard knock on what sounds like the front door steals my words. It's not your normal kind of knock, and when the doorbell starts ringing moments later, I'm hit with a feeling of déjà vu from the other night.

"Fuck." Sutton quickly pushes to his feet, finding his shirt on the floor before sliding it over his head.

"You don't think it's him, do you?" I ask as the knocking continues, more forcefully this time.

"No." The way he says it, with such certainty, clicks something into place I refused to let myself entertain last night.

“How do you know?” I quickly scramble to my feet, following him out of the bedroom.

“I just know.” His tone is curt, his shoulders tight with tension.

“What the fuck is going on?” Remi appears in his doorway just as we pass it, but I’m too busy trying to keep up with Sutton to stop and give him any sort of real explanation. Not that I could, considering I have no idea what’s going on.

I feel him follow us down the stairs, but I don’t turn around to look at him.

When we reach the bottom step, Randel has just stepped into the foyer, a robe cinched tightly around him as he glances through the glass panes to see who is beating down his door at such an early hour.

“Dad, don’t.” Sutton is quick to cut him off at the door, placing his own hand on the knob.

“It’s the police.” Randel, who looks like he’s still half asleep, searches his son’s face for an answer. Meanwhile, I’m pretty certain my heart is about to pound straight out of my freaking chest.

My body knows the truth, just like it did last night when I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. Even if my mind has yet to accept any of it.

“They’re here for me.” He places a hand on his father’s shoulder in a reassuring gesture and the two share a long, silent exchange.

Without a word, Randel steps back, allowing his son to unlock and pull open the door.

Confusion and fear cloud what’s right in front of me.

He said it himself—they’re here for him.

His unexplained disappearing act yesterday. Being gone all day with no real excuse besides some bullshit about taking care of things before his move. But what could he possibly need to take care of here that would take him an entire day? He hasn’t lived here in years.

He lied to me. I knew it last night, and I know it without a doubt now. He wasn’t taking care of something, but rather someone. And I don’t have to question who that someone is when three police officers come into view.

“Sutton Barnett?” one of the officers asks like he already knows exactly who he’s looking at. “I’m going to need you to step outside, please.”

“Of course.” Sutton slips on his shoes next to the door and without once looking at me, steps out onto the porch.

The next set of events happens so quickly that I've barely registered them before Sutton's hands are cuffed behind his back and the officer is reading him his rights.

Assault.

It's one of the only words I catch through the thick air that seems to settle over me like a fog, clouding everything around me.

"What did you do?" I don't realize it's me who's spoken until Sutton finally, finally, looks up at me.

"What I had to." I almost don't recognize his voice, the way he says it—*what I had to*—like someone held a gun to his head or something.

"Don't say anything," Randel is quick to interject. "I will follow you to the police station and call an attorney on the way. Until then, you do not say a word. Do you hear me, Son?"

He offers his father nothing more than a stiff nod before his gaze turns to the man I had completely forgotten was standing directly behind me... Remi.

"Take care of her, Brother." It's the last thing he's able to say before the police tug him off the porch.

"Sutton!" The reality of what's happening finally starts to settle over me and my hands begin to shake. "Sutton!" I move to chase after him, but Remi catches me around the waist and hauls my back into his chest.

"Pen, don't." His voice is soft, pleading.

"Get off me." I try to break free, to what avail, I do not know. Only that I need to go after Sutton.

"I can't. Just calm down." I feel his breath on the side of my face, his mouth directly next to my ear.

"Calm down!" My voice trembles. "They are taking him away." I don't realize I'm crying until I lick my too dry lips and taste the saltiness of my own tears. "Why are they taking him away?"

"You know why." Remi forces me to face him as they shove Sutton into the back of the police car. "You know why. Because you told him the truth." He's in my face now, so close that our noses almost touch. "You told him, Pen. What did you think he was going to do?"

I pull away from him like he's just touched me with a hot branding iron, stumbling backward so forcefully that I damn near topple backward over the top step. Luckily, I'm able to right myself just in time, locking out my knees to keep myself from crumbling to the ground.

"What did he do?" I scream, needing to hear him say it.

“He went after Harris. I don’t know how bad it is, only that it’s bad.”

“I’m going to get dressed and talk to your mother. Keep her here until we figure this out,” Randel says to Remi seconds before disappearing inside.

Keep her here... As if any of them have a say in where I go. Anger floods my vision. But I know it’s not any of them I’m angry at but myself.

“You knew. Last night you knew and you lied to me.” My chin quivers as I speak.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked me to.”

“Because he asked you to?” I bark. “This is me, Remi. Since when do you lie to me over Sutton?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he fires back, effectively knocking the air straight from my lungs. “Pen.” He quickly reaches for me, realizing his mistake.

“No.” I shove his hand away. “Do not touch me. I have to go get dressed.”

“You need to stay here. You’ll only make things worse.”

“I have to know.” I push past him toward the door. He doesn’t stop me, but he does follow closely behind me as I enter the house and head directly up the stairs.

“You have to know what, Pen? What do you have to know?” Remi is fast on my heels as I throw open the door to the guest room, snagging my bag off the floor before dropping it on the edge of the bed.

“What he did.” I start rustling through my clothes.

“What do you mean, what he did? He tracked Harris down and beat the absolute fuck out of him. Did you not see Sutton’s knuckles?”

The memory of how rough and broken his skin felt beneath my fingers comes back with a vengeance, hitting me square in the face.

“It was dark.” I choke back a sob, pulling out a pair of jeans and a sweater from my bag.

“When he got home yesterday, he was covered in blood, so much blood.” Remi’s voice shakes.

“You saw him?” I abruptly stop what I’m doing and turn to face Remi.

“He called me when you were in the shower. I’ve never heard him so panicked.”

“You helped him.”

“I took him a clean set of clothes and—”

“And made sure I was distracted so I wouldn’t see him come inside.” The pieces start clicking into place.

He doesn’t have to answer. The guilty look on his face is answer enough.

“How could you?”

“What would you have had me do? He’s my brother!”

“Since when has that mattered to you?” I fire back.

“Why are you turning this on me? He’s the one who did this!” He does a shit job of keeping the anger from his voice. Not that I can blame him. I feel like I’m unraveling at the seams myself.

All I can think about is Sutton, all alone, in a cold jail cell, knowing I put him there. Because Remi is right. This is on me. I told him the truth. I should have known he wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“Because of me!” My voice explodes from my throat. “Because I told him what Harris did to me. That he touched me—purposely hurt me. That he forced me to... to take him into my mouth. That he did it over and over again.” My airway tightens with emotion, making it hard to pull in a real breath.

Remi’s expression goes stoic and only then do I realize what I’ve said. I never meant for him to find out like this, but really, what good does it do to keep it from him anymore? Now that Sutton is in jail and Harris is...

“Where is he?” I ask abruptly. “Harris?”

“Fuck if I know. Best guess, he’s in the hospital.”

“The hospital?” I choke on the word.

“Sutton said he thought he might have killed him.”

I feel unsteady on my feet.

“Do you think he did?” My mouth is so dry I can feel my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth.

“The fact that the police arrested Sutton for assault tells me he’s alive, but I don’t know what kind of shape he’s in.”

I can’t even wrap my head around what’s happening right now. It’s like everything is hitting me in quick succession, but it just bounces off as soon as it makes contact, my brain not able to process the information properly.

“We need to go to the police station.” I decide.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. They’re going to process him and then he’s probably going straight to an interrogation room. They won’t let you see him.”

“I have to see him.” I sob, tears once again springing free from my eyes. “I have to.”

“There’s nothing you can do right now.” Remi’s hands settle on my shoulders, holding me steady when I sway. “The best thing you can do is wait.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one whose entire world just drove away in a police car.”

“Last time I checked, I was part of that world, too. And I’m still here. I’m right here, Pen, and I’m not going anywhere. We will figure this out. My dad will figure out a way to get him out. You just have to give him time.”

“And what if he doesn’t get out? What if Harris dies?” My knees tremble beneath my weight as the realization takes hold.

“Don’t do that. Don’t go to worst-case scenarios. For all we know, Harris is fine.”

“Then why did they arrest Sutton?”

“If I walk up and punch someone, they can have me arrested for assault. We don’t know how bad it really is. The best thing we can do is stay calm and wait to hear from my parents.”

“Oh God, your mom.” My hand comes up to cover my mouth. “I bet she’s freaking out right now.”

“She’ll be fine. And so will Sutton. Everything is going to be okay, Pen.”

“You don’t know that.” I shake my head.

“You’re right. I don’t.” He blows out a heavy puff of air.

“I want to go to the police station. I know you said they won’t let me see him,” I quickly add before he can cut me off. “But I can’t just sit here and wait. But first…” A thought takes root and once it does, there’s no getting rid of it. “I’m going to the hospital.” I turn back to my duffel, pulling out my toiletries bag.

“Like hell you are. We don’t even know if Harris is there and even if he is, I’m not letting you go anywhere near that fucker after everything you just said.”

“It’s not up to you.” I tuck the toiletries bag under my arm. “If I can’t see Sutton, if I can’t talk to him and get some real answers, then I’m going to go find them out for myself.”

“Pen, you can’t expect me to just let you go.”

I spin around so fast I damn near lose my footing.

“You can’t stop me.”

“You have no idea what you could be walking into, and that’s if he’s even there.”

“I need to do this, Remi. If he’s there, I need to see him.” I square my shoulders. “Now, you can either go with me or get the hell out of my way.”

Indecision swims behind his big green eyes, but he gives me a curt nod just the same.

“Give me five minutes to get ready.”

“I’ll meet you at the door.” I push past him, making a beeline for the bathroom.



“Are you sure about this, Pen?” Remi matches my quick stride with ease as we make our way down the hallway to the room where Harris is.

I lied to the front desk and told them I was his sister. I mean, in a way it’s sort of true. Luckily, they didn’t question it and offered up his room information without a second thought. While a part of me was relieved to learn he was in fact here, it’s only made the rocks that have settled in the pit of my stomach that much heavier to carry around.

I was so sure I was making the right decision in coming here. So sure this is what I needed to do. That this is where I would find the answers I need. But now that I’m here, now that I’m this close, I’m not sure of anything anymore.

My hands tremble at my sides, and without missing a beat, Remi’s fingers slide around mine, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

“It’s not too late to turn around,” he offers, almost hopeful.

“No. I made it this far.” I square my shoulders. “I need to see this through.”

“If you’re sure.” Remi pulls to a stop outside room 346, squeezing my hand even tighter now, like he’s as nervous as I am about going inside.

I hadn’t considered until this very moment what this might feel like for him. Knowing what Harris did to me. Knowing that the man behind this door is the reason his brother is in jail right now. He probably wants to kill him himself. But in true Remi fashion, he offers me a small smile of encouragement and waits.

He waits for me to make the first move. He knows it has to be my decision and I love him all the more for it.

Knowing the longer I stand here the harder it will be to go inside, I force myself to reach for the doorknob, clicking it down before slowly pushing it open.

There are no lights on in the room but enough spills in from the hallway to light our way. I take one step inside and then another, my eyes adjusting to the dimness. There is no sound other than a beeping noise coming from one of the machines, and from the still form lying on the bed in front of me, it's clear he's either sleeping or unconscious.

The latter proves to be true when my eyes finally focus in on Harris's face, which is nearly unrecognizable beneath the bruising and swelling that makes his features look twice their normal size. I watch his chest move up and down for a long moment before letting my eyes go back to his face.

There's a bandage across his nose, which is clearly broken. Stitches under his left eye, across his forehead, and on his chin. He also has a shaved patch on the side of his head where I see staples starting just above his temple and ending behind his ear.

"Fuck me." I hear Remi murmur under his breath from beside me. "I thought he was exaggerating when he said he thought he killed him. But by the looks of him, he's hanging on by a thread."

A weird sort of sick satisfaction swims through me at the sight of him. It's not that I don't feel bad. I do. No one deserves to be beaten the way he so clearly was. But I also can't stop the young girl—the one who suffered at the hands of this monster for far too long—from feeling a little vindicated.

"I've seen my brother get into fights more times than I can count, but this... I didn't know he was capable of something like this."

"Sutton did this." The reality of the situation slowly works its way in.

It was one thing when he punched Harris outside of that restaurant all those months ago. Harris followed us outside. He came after us. But this... Sutton purposely sought him out to do this. My insides coil in a way that makes me feel moments away from losing the contents of my stomach.

"He promised me he wouldn't go after him," I say, more to myself than Remi.

"You should have known he would never be able to keep such a promise."

I turn my face toward Remi to find him already looking at me.

“You think this is my fault?”

“Of course I don’t.” He squeezes the hand he’s still holding. “But I also can’t blame my brother for this. If you had told me, if I found out before Sutton, I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing. Even standing here now, I want to suffocate him with his own fucking pillow and let the fucker die.”

“If he dies...”

“I’m not saying I’m going to. I have to hope he makes it for Sutton’s sake and for yours. But make no mistake. I want him dead as badly as my brother clearly did. What he did to you, Pen...” He shakes his head slowly. “I should have stopped him.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I knew something. I should have pressed. I should have forced it out of you. What kind of friend knows something is wrong but does nothing to find out what it is?”

“You were the best kind of friend. I didn’t need your protection. I just needed you.”

“I should have stopped him.”

“Don’t. Don’t blame yourself for this. I’m the one who didn’t tell you the truth. I’m the one who held it all in instead of asking for help. I was so convinced that there wasn’t anything anyone could do that it seemed easier to just let it happen. I was afraid that if I told someone, Rick and Jean would find out and then things would be so much worse.”

“You should have trusted that me and my parents would have protected you.”

“I didn’t want to burden anyone.”

“Pen, do you even hear yourself?”

“I was young and scared, Remi. Yes, I hear how ridiculous it all sounds now, but back then, it was the only thing that made sense. Until you’ve experienced something like this firsthand, you can’t judge another person who did their best to deal with an impossible situation.”

“I’m not judging you. I would never judge you. I just wish you knew you could have come to me.”

“I’ve always known that. Your friendship is the only thing that got me out of that place alive. You may not have been able to stop him, to stop them, but you saved me just the same. Make no mistake about that.”

“I hate what he did to you.” When tears fill his eyes, it nearly drops me to the floor.

“So do I. But I’m okay.” I turn to face him fully. “Look at me.” I touch his cheek, urging his gaze back to mine. “I’m okay. In fact, I’m happier than I’ve ever been. Or at least, I was.” I drop my hand, looking back over at Harris. “He has to live,” I croak.

“He will.” Remi pulls me into his arms. “He will,” he repeats. Whether for his benefit or my own, I’m not sure.

I don’t know how long we stand like that, wrapped in each other’s arms, the steady beeping of the machine the only sound in the room. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. All I know is when the door swings open and a familiar voice hits my ears, I feel like I’m thirteen years old all over again.

“What are you doing in here?” Jean McKinney’s voice is just as I remember—bitter and raspy, like she’s smoked too many cigarettes over the years, which is likely, given how her Marlboros were never far from where she was.

Remi and I instantly break apart, and I reluctantly turn my head toward the door.

Recognition flashes in her eyes, an instant snarl tugging at her aged features.

“You.” She seethes, eyebrows pinched as her gaze narrows. “Come back to finish the job, did you? Nurse! Nurse!” She starts screaming, moving to flip on the overhead light.

I grimace when the bright fluorescents fill the room.

“That’s not necessary.” I grab Remi’s arm. “We were just leaving.” My instinct to duck and run whenever Jean is in the same room as me has not lessened over the years.

I urge Remi toward the door, eager to get the hell out of here, but he doesn’t move a single inch, his unreadable stare locked on Jean.

“Do you know what that piece of shit you call a son did to her?”

“Remi...” I plead, tugging his arm again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. My son never touched that”—she gives me a once-over—“that trash.”

“Call her trash again and you’ll be lying in the bed next to your son.” Remi grits his teeth.

“You dare threaten me?”

“I’m gonna do more than threaten you. I’m gonna see that when your son wakes, he spends the rest of his miserable fucking life rotting behind bars.”

Jean lets out a high-pitched laugh, accenting the deep wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She looks exactly as I remember and yet, like she’s aged twenty years at the same time. Her teeth are chipped and broken, missing more than she probably has, and her skin is peppered with weird markings and spots, an obvious sign of her drug use.

“And how exactly are you going to do that?” Her hands go to her hips, her sneer still firmly in place.

“He’s a rapist and an addict, among many other things, I’m sure. Give me time. I’ll make sure he gets what he deserves.”

“First your brother puts my baby in the hospital and then you show up here, in his room, and you threaten to try and put him in jail. Haven’t you people done enough?”

“Oh, Jean,” Remi says in the most patronizing way. “We’re just getting started.”

This time when I tug his arm, he moves, passing Jean with an evil sort of smile that I’ve never seen cross Remi’s face. If I didn’t know him as well as I do, *I* might even be scared of him.

“Come here again and I’ll call the police,” she warns as we step past her into the hallway.

“Your threats don’t scare me, Jean.” It’s me who speaks this time, fueled by the way she turns and looks at me.

“You always were more trouble than you were worth.”

“And what was *I* worth to you? A few more track marks up your arm? A few more beers in your gut? You have no remorse for the way you treated me, for the way your husband treated me?” I look around, making sure she knows that Rick’s absence doesn’t go unnoticed. My guess, he’s probably left her for someone else. Either that or he drank himself into an early grave. Either scenario seems extremely likely. “For the way you allowed your son to treat me?”

“We were nothing but good to you.”

“Good to me?” I bark out a humorless laugh. “You made me your servant. You hit me unnecessarily. You locked me in my room for hours without food or water or access to a bathroom for no reason other than you could. And you let your son sexually assault me over and over again.”

“Lies,” she snaps. “That’s all you’ve ever told.”

The thread holding my temper in place snaps and anger like I've never released flows from every pore of my body, radiating around me like an aura.

"Guess there's only one way to find out," I warn, not sure how I'm able to keep up this hardened exterior when I'm trembling like a leaf on the inside.

The threat was empty as it left my mouth, but now I'm starting to realize that the truth might be the very thing that can save Sutton. If they know why he did what he did, maybe they'll show him leniency.

"Your brother will spend the rest of his life in prison for this." She turns to Remi.

"How do you know my brother did this?" He asks a question I hadn't even thought to ask.

"Because he was identified by two other people who were with Harris."

"You mean to tell me there were two people with your son and neither one of them stepped in to help him?" Sarcasm drips from Remi's words. "Must be some really great friends he's got. Birds of a feather..."

"Get out of here!" she screams, her face going beet red in an instant. "Leave, now!"

"We're leaving," I speak directly to Remi.

"And don't you dare come back!"

I look over my shoulder, hoping this is the very last time I ever have to lay eyes on Jean McKinney.

"I hope he lives," I tell her as calmly as I can muster. "So that he can answer to the police when they come looking for him."

With that, I take off up the hallway, walking so fast that I trip over my own feet not once but twice before finally making it to the elevators.

My hands are trembling uncontrollably as I reach out and press the down button, adrenaline pumping so violently inside of me that my entire body shakes from the intensity.

I'm seconds away from falling apart. I know it. I can feel it building inside of me like a tidal wave that's only moments away from crashing onto the shore.

"Aspen?" I look up to see Remi staring at me with soft eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But I will be." I take a deep breath in through my nose before blowing it slowly past my lips. "I need you to take me to the police station," I tell him.

“We’ve already been over this, Pen. There’s nothing you can do there. They aren’t going to let you see him.”

“I’m not going for Sutton,” I tell him, my resolve solidifying. “I think it’s time I report Harris to the authorities. It may be too late for them to do anything about it, but I have to try. If it helps Sutton, I have to try.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“Okay then. Let’s go to the police station.”

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Chapter Twelve

Sutton



“So, let me get this straight. You were just walking along, minding your own business, and Mr. McKinney attacked you?” the bald officer in front of me asks, his partner tapping the table with the tips of his fingers, putting me more on edge than I already am.

We’ve been at this for hours and the hold on my temper is lessening by the fucking second. If my father doesn’t get his attorney here soon, I might be facing a hell of a lot more than assault charges.

“I told you, it was self-defense,” I grumble for the fucking millionth time.

“If it was self-defense, then why did you run?”

“I already told you. I panicked.”

“And this has nothing to do with the fact that Mr. McKinney has been harassing your parents?”

“I didn’t know he was,” I lie, digging myself deeper into a hole.

I didn’t come in here with the intention of lying. I was going to admit to what I did and deal with the consequences—whatever they may be—but when the two detectives walked in and sat down, I just blurted out the self-defense bullshit and now if I backtrack, they’ll think everything I say is a lie.

Truth be told, it’s not even myself I’m worried about. I keep seeing Aspen’s face, the panic and confusion that flooded her features as they tucked me into the back seat of that cop car. I had no chance to explain. No chance to make her see that I had no other choice. That piece of shit had to pay for what he did, even if that meant I had to break my promise to her.

“Convenient, don’t you think?” Bald officer’s partner slurps his coffee loudly, testing my ability not to snap. He’s purposefully being an annoyance to see if I’ll crack.

“Look, I already told you what happened. They’re junkies, every fucking one of them. Why is it so hard to believe that they tried to rob me? Are you

telling me this doesn't happen every day in this fucking city?"

"It does, and usually those cases are pretty cut and dry. Here's the problem, though; we don't think you're being truthful. Innocent people don't run. And if you were, as you say, the victim, then why did two witnesses come forward saying otherwise?"

"You'd believe junkies over me?" My shoulders grow tight with tension. I'm like a fish out of water, floundering all over the place trying to find a place I can breathe.

"I believe the evidence. And the evidence says you sought Mr. McKinney out and attacked a defenseless man, beating him to a pulp before leaving him for dead."

"I don't know what—" My words die on my lips when an older man bursts into the room, dressed in a brown suit, his gray hair combed to the side. He clutches a briefcase in one hand and instantly sets his sights on me.

"Don't say another word," he instructs, turning to the two officers. "I'm Ronald Sears. I will be representing Mr. Barnett. He will not be answering any additional questions at this time."

Knowing they have no choice but to concede, the two officers reluctantly stand.

"We will get to the truth, one way or another," Baldy warns before following his partner out of the room.

"Mr. Barnett." The lawyer takes the seat directly next to me. "I'm Ronald Sears." He introduces himself a second time. "Your father arranged for me to represent you."

"Sutton," I grumble. "Call me Sutton."

"Very well, Sutton." He crosses one leg over the other, resting his hands in his lap. "Now, first things first, I need to know everything you said to the police in detail. Don't leave anything out. We can't have them picking apart any holes in our story."

"Is he dead?" I ask instead of answering his question.

"Mr. McKinney is currently unconscious with very extensive injuries, but he is alive... For now."

I'm not sure if I'm more relieved or disappointed by the news.

It goes without saying that the last thing I want to do is to spend the rest of my life in prison, to give up a future I didn't even realize I wanted until recently. A future that just a few hours ago was grasped firmly in my hands and now is slipping through my fingers faster than I can contain it.

All the years I wasted thinking I had all the time in the world. Now I see how quickly things can change. But even knowing all of that, I'd almost rather rot here than have that motherfucker free, able to hurt someone else the way he hurt Aspen.

My skin crawls at the thought. Maybe it's better if he never wakes up. My life seems an easy trade to rid this world of that piece of shit. At least then Aspen would have some semblance of justice. At least then she could rest easy, knowing he could never hurt her, or anyone else, ever again.

"I admitted that it was me." I force myself to focus on what's right in front of me. That's all I can really do until I know the outcome. "There were two other people there and apparently one of them recognized me from high school, identified me to the cops."

"I'm well aware of how you ended up here. What I'm interested in knowing is why."

"I told the cops that I was just walking by, minding my own business, when Harris and his two friends tried to rob me with a knife. I felt threatened for my life."

"Let me guess; they didn't believe you?"

"Is it so unbelievable? People get assaulted and robbed every day, usually by people like..." I can't even say his fucking name out loud.

"Your parents have filed harassment charges against Mr. McKinney. Were you aware?"

"No." I shake my head, confused as to why my parents didn't mention that when he showed up the other night.

"Did you know he had been harassing them?" He continues when I make no attempt to answer. "I need honesty, Sutton. It's the only way I can help you."

"I knew he had been showing up looking for Aspen. I didn't know my parents had filed any charges."

"Ms. Cooper is your girlfriend, yes?"

"My fiancée," I correct.

"My apologies, your father didn't mention that you were engaged."

"My father doesn't know," I admit.

"I see. And what is Ms. Cooper's connection to Mr. McKinney?"

"He was her foster brother."

"Tell me more about that. Why would Mr. McKinney show up at your parents' house looking for her?"

“Because he’s a sick fuck.” I can’t stop myself from saying.

“Why do you say that?” Again, I make no attempt to answer him.

“Remember, complete honesty.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What do you mean you can’t tell me?”

“It’s not my story to tell.”

“But you know why?”

“I do.”

“And is it the reason you went after Mr. McKinney yesterday?”

I answer with a simple nod.

“You purposely sought him out?”

“I did.”

“With the intention of harming him?” He continues to hit me with questions, one after the other.

“I wanted him to know that he couldn’t just get away with it.”

“Get away with what?”

I meet his dull blue eyes.

“I can’t tell you,” I repeat a second time.

I did this. Me and only me. I won’t put Aspen’s past on display for the legal system to pick apart and make public knowledge. Even if it means I will have to spend the rest of my life in jail, I will protect her. I will protect her like we all should have protected her when she needed us.

“What *can* you tell me then?”

“That he got what he deserved and if given the choice, I’d do it all over again. Only this time, I’d make sure he was good and dead.”

“I hope I don’t have to tell you not to say that to anyone besides me.”

“You don’t.”

Glad he thinks I’m that fucking stupid.

“Your initial hearing is set for tomorrow at eleven. As long as Mr. McKinney’s condition doesn’t deteriorate, you will be facing the charge of assault. I’m pretty confident that because this is your first offense, the judge will allow bail to be set, which means that if someone can pay it, you’ll be free pending a trial date.”

“And if his condition *does* deteriorate?” I ask.

“Let’s hope for your sake it doesn’t. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a few other people to speak to before then, so if there’s anything else you can think to tell me.”

“No.”

I know I should be more cooperative. This is my fucking life hanging in the balance. But I don't know how to be truthful and protect Aspen at the same time. And if the choice is between me or her, I will choose her every single fucking time.

“I'll be in touch then.”

“Wait,” I call after him before he's able to signal the officer to open the door. “Will they let me see her?”

“I assume you mean Ms. Cooper?”

“Aspen,” I correct.

“She *is* here, but no, they will not let you speak to her. If all goes well tomorrow, you'll be able to leave with her after your hearing.”

“Don't let her in the courtroom,” I call to his back.

“Not sure how much control I have in the matter, but I will pass the message along.”

“Thank you,” I croak. It's bad enough that she saw me placed inside a cop car. I can't stomach her watching me being led into a courtroom handcuffed, in this fucking jumpsuit.

He gives me a stiff nod before knocking on the door, an officer opening it moments later for him to step out into the hallway, but I barely register the movement.

I'm too focused on Aspen, on knowing that she's just a few feet away and I can't see her or talk to her. It's a form of torture in itself.

She shouldn't be here, in a police station, worrying if the man she loves is about to spend the rest of his life behind bars. She should be at home, wrapped in my arms, loved and safe. I wish I were the kind of man who could have given her that. I wish I could have kept my promise, but I'm simply not built that way.

I couldn't sleep knowing that he was still out there, probably hurting other women. Tigers don't change their stripes. If there's one, there are bound to be others. I did this world a favor. And while no, my intention wasn't to kill him, once I was staring into his dark, cold eyes, I wanted to. It's why I couldn't stop. Why I beat him so badly that by the time I was done, he was half dead, blood pooling on the concrete around his head.

I look down at my mangled knuckles, at the broken and scabbed flesh, wishing I felt regret or at the very least guilt. But I don't. Guilty for breaking

my promise but not guilty for what I did to him. How could I knowing what I know?

I can't get the thought out of my head. The things Aspen told me. Every time I close my eyes, all I can see is the image of her on her knees and him standing over her, his fist tangled in her hair.

I heave, fairly certain if there were anything on my stomach, I would have lost it all over the floor long ago.

I hate him for hurting her.

I hate Remi for not protecting her.

I hate my parents.

I hate the system.

But mostly, I hate myself.

I hate that when she took my hand that night at the party, I didn't see what was really going on. Instead of recognizing her cry for help, I fucked her and left her alone like she meant nothing.

Pressing my elbows to the table, I scrub my eyes with the backs of my hands, trying to rid myself of the images that blur my vision.

"Time to go." I don't even realize that the door's been opened again until a familiar voice jars me from my thoughts.

I look up to see Baldy approach, a pair of handcuffs dangling from his fingers. I stand, turning without any resistance as he snaps them around my wrists and leads me from the room, taking me out the same way he brought me in.

Most cops would probably praise what I did, but this fucker seems to be the exception. He treats me like I just broke into someone's house and killed someone. He treats me like a criminal, which I guess, in the eyes of the law, I am now.

We walk down a line of holding cells, some empty, some occupied. I try to ignore the eyes that follow me as we pass. When we reach the last cell, the lock clicks open, someone no doubt watching us.

"Don't I get a phone call?" I ask as the officer forces me inside the cell.

"A little too late for that one. But nice try." He unlocks my handcuffs before quickly stepping back out of the cell. The door swings closed, the lock clicking into place instantaneously. "The only person I'm legally obligated to let you talk to is your attorney."

Without another word, he spins on his heel and disappears from view.

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Chapter Thirteen

Aspen



“Are you okay?” Remi waits to ask until we’ve walked through the front door of his parents’ house.

“I don’t know,” I admit, feeling almost numb.

“I know how hard that must have been for you. For what it’s worth, I’m really proud of you.”

“Proud of me?” I blow out a puff of air. “How could you possibly be proud of me after everything you just heard?”

After leaving the hospital, Remi took me straight to the police station, where I spent nearly three hours in a room with him and a female officer, recounting everything I had endured during my time at the McKinney’s residence.

I knew it was too little too late. I knew it before ever walking into that room. Knew that there had to be some statute of limitation or something that would prevent me from pursuing criminal charges, but I had to try. I would have done anything if I thought it might help Sutton.

I won’t lie and say I’m not angry at him for what he did. I’m furious. But I also know he did it because he loves me and that this was his messed-up way of showing me how much.

“Are you kidding me? You had the strength to go in there and relive some pretty significant trauma to a complete stranger.”

“A lot of good it did me,” I grumble, kicking off my shoes at the door.

“You heard what she said. You could potentially have a case against him.”

“She said the area was gray because we were both minors at the time. I could potentially have a case *if* I had proof, which I don’t.”

“But *he* doesn’t know that, now does he?” I can quite literally see the wheels turning behind those bright green eyes of his, a small smile tugging at

the corners of his mouth.

“What is it? What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that if Harris survives, we might be able to use this to our advantage.”

“The key word being *if*, Remi. You saw him just the same as I did. He’s going to die. You know it and I know it.”

“Hey.” He has me in his arms in an instant. “Don’t do that. People survive worse than this every single day.”

“And people die from less.”

“He isn’t going to die,” he speaks directly into my hair.

“But what if he does?” I choke, the reality of the day finally seeming to catch up with me.

“He won’t.” I’m not sure if his reassurances are more for me or for himself. I guess they’re for both of us.

“But what if he does?” I ask again, pulling back enough to look up at Remi’s face. “What if he dies and Sutton becomes a murderer? What if he never gets out of jail? What if I lose him forever?” My entire body begins to tremble.

“Don’t get yourself worked up. Take a breath.” His hands come up to cup my face and all I can think of is how if Sutton were here, he’d tell him to get his hands off his girl and the two would have some pissing match about whose girl I actually am. “Breathe, Pen.”

I do as he instructs, pulling in a deep breath before blowing it out slowly.

“Again.”

I repeat the process a second time, feeling my anxiety start to lessen, but only slightly.

“There you go.” Remi’s voice is soft, coaxing me from having a full-blown panic attack. “Better?” He releases my face when he’s satisfied that my freak-out is under control.

“I’m sorry.” I swipe angrily at the tears that squeak out of the corners of my eyes.

“Do not ever apologize for the way you feel.”

“How do you feel?” I think to ask for the very first time since Sutton was led away in handcuffs, so consumed by my own fear and grief that I didn’t stop to think about how all this is probably affecting him.

“I’m okay.” He wipes away another of my tears with the pad of his thumb.

“Are you, though? After everything you’ve witnessed and heard today and now knowing your brother is in jail and could possibly stay there for a very long time, you really expect me to believe you’re just okay?”

“I’m just... I just feel really sorry.” He looks down at his feet.

“For what?”

“For not seeing the truth when it was right in front of me. For not stopping him when *I* had the chance.” When his gaze comes back up to mine, unshed tears cloud his eyes.

“This isn’t on you.” It’s my turn to reach up and cup *his* cheeks. “How could you have known?”

“But I did know, Pen.” He pulls my hands away but doesn’t let go of them, clenching them in his own. “I could tell something was wrong and yet I did nothing.”

“You can’t do something based on a suspicion.”

“It was my job to protect you.”

“It wasn’t. The only thing I ever needed from you was your friendship and you gave me that a million times over and again. You were what got me through that situation, Remi. Your friendship, your love. I would have never survived without you. Please don’t beat yourself up over this. I kept this from you. This is on me, not you. Had I come clean sooner, had I gone to the police when I actually stood a chance of doing something about it, none of this would be happening right now. No, this is my fault and mine alone.”

“You are a victim,” he disagrees.

“No, I’m a survivor,” I correct him, for the first time actually feeling like one.

I faced Jean today. I went to the police and opened up about my past. It may change nothing, but it has changed me. My entire life I’ve walked around looking over my shoulder. Even hundreds of miles away and I was always so sure it was only a matter of time before they caught up with me. But I’m through giving them power. I’m through giving *him* power.

“You really are.” He brushes his thumb along my lower lip. “Is it weird that even though he’s sitting in jail, facing possible murder charges, that I’m actually jealous of my brother?”

“Remi...”

“I’m not saying that to make you uncomfortable. Sutton is the one you want to be with and I’ve accepted that. Hell, I’m even happy for you. But a part of me can’t help but wish...” He trails off, not finishing his thought.

“Can’t help but wish what?”

“That you had chosen me instead.”

“But I... I thought...” My stomach twists uncomfortably.

“I love you, Aspen. Of course I do. How could I not? But I’ve accepted that this is all we will ever be and I’ve made peace with that. I just... sometimes I wonder where we’d be right now if you’d chosen differently. If we both had.”

“Me too.” I let myself admit, because I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it. “But we both made choices that led us here. Now all we can do is live with them.”

“Yeah.” He blows out a slow breath. “Will you let me make you something to eat?” He abruptly changes the subject.

“I don’t think I can eat.” I shake my head, the thought of eating making my stomach churn.

“Pen, you haven’t eaten all day. Please, let me make you something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t care. You need to eat,” he states more firmly. “We both do.”

The look he gives me leaves no room for argument.

“Okay,” I finally concede, knowing he’s not going to let this go.

Tangling his fingers with mine, he leads me down the hallway and into the kitchen, leaving me on one of the stools before moving to the pantry to pull out what he needs for peanut butter and jelly, one of the only things Remi has mastered to date. Though I don’t actually see how mastering peanut butter and jelly is a real thing. Though Remi will argue with you if you say as much, claiming there’s a precise ratio of peanut butter and jelly that must be used in order to create the perfect sandwich. I’ve never much cared either way.

“Here we go.” Remi sets a sandwich and a glass of milk in front of me a few short minutes later, turning to set his own plate and cup on the bar before taking the stool directly across from me.

We eat in silence. Or rather, Remi eats and I pick at the corner of my sandwich, barely able to stomach more than a couple of bites.

“Pen.” Remi draws my gaze to him as he stands, his sandwich and milk long gone.

“I told you I wasn’t hungry.”

“Half the sandwich. That’s all I ask.”

“How can I sit here and eat when Sutton is sitting in a cold jail cell all by himself, his entire future up in the air?”

“Easy. You lift the sandwich to your mouth and take a bite.”

My flat expression morphs into a glare.

“I’m kidding.” He shakes his head. “Just trying to lighten the mood.” He carries his plate and cup to the sink before reclaiming his seat. “You know Sutton would want you to eat.” He tries a different tactic.

“Then perhaps he should have thought of that before he broke his promise to me.” My anger boils to the surface yet again, my emotions so all over the place I can’t get a grip on how I actually feel.

“That’s fair.” Remi is careful to keep his tone gentle, but I can see he wants to say more.

“What? If you have something to say, say it.”

“It’s just... and don’t be angry with me for saying so, but had you told me what happened and made me promise not to retaliate, I would have broken that promise too.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. You keep your promises.”

“I wouldn’t have kept that one. In fact, if Harris wasn’t already lying in a hospital bed, I’d be out trying to find him to put him in one as we speak.” His nostrils flare. “I understand why you didn’t want Sutton to go after Harris. I get it. But you asked too much of him, Pen. You underestimated what you mean to him... What you mean to me.”

“If I meant that much, he would have respected my wishes.”

“You knew he wouldn’t, just like you knew I wouldn’t, which is precisely why you never told me and you didn’t tell him until you felt like you needed to. You knew neither of us would be able to stomach what he did. You knew we’d want to make him pay. I think in a way, you were hoping Sutton would go after him and everything would be in the open once and for all.”

“How can you say that?” I shove my plate away, my anger mounting.

“Because I know you, Pen. Maybe you didn’t tell Sutton *because* you wanted him to go after him, but you told him *knowing* he would, whether you realize it or not.”

“So you’re saying this is my fault, then? That I’m the reason Sutton is sitting in that jail cell right now? Well, guess what, you’re right. It is my fault. You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t wish I could go back and erase every word that came out of my mouth that led us to this very moment? Because I do.”

“Pen”—he reaches across the bar, resting his hand on mine—“I’m not saying this is your fault. It isn’t. It’s Harris’s fault. It will always be his fault. But don’t fault my brother for doing exactly what you knew he would.”

“I didn’t know he would do this,” I argue.

“A part of you did, which is why you asked him to promise you not to. Sutton has never been a rational person. He acts before he thinks. You know that probably better than most. I’m not saying he shouldn’t be held accountable for what he did, be angry with him, curse him if you want to, but forgive him.”

“Forgive him for what?” I sniff, feeling another bout of tears flooding to the surface. “I’m not even mad at him. I want to be. I’m trying to be, because being angry is easier. I just want to go back, Remi. I want to erase the last twenty-four hours and pretend they never happened.”

“I know what that feels like. But we can’t go back. All we can do is move forward.”

“How?”

“By putting one foot in front of the other. Things are pretty messed up right now. I’ll admit. But you’ve been through worse, Pen, and you’ll get through this too. And I will be here with you every step of the way. No matter what happens. No matter the outcome, I will be here.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

He’s on his feet and around the bar before the first tear has fallen.

“Don’t ever say that.” He tugs me into his arms, squeezing me so tightly it’s almost hard to breathe. “It’s me and you against the world, remember?”

I bury my face in his chest, locking my arms around his back as I let his words soothe me, as I let them remind me that there isn’t anything I can’t face as long as I have this man beside me. Like always, he is my rock, my light amidst the dark, lending me his strength when I can’t find any of my own.

“You and me against the world,” I recite the words back to him, words that feel more true now than they ever have before. Because depending on what happens next, Remi may be all I have left when it’s all said and done.



“Pen.” My eyes dart open to see Remi sitting on the bed next to me, his hair damp from the shower. “Wake up.” He shakes my shoulder gently.

It takes my tired brain several long seconds before the events of yesterday hit me square in the chest like a thousand-pound weight, making it hard to move.

“What is it? What happened?” It takes more effort than it should to force myself upright, my eyes flicking around Remi’s room.

I don’t remember falling asleep, only the steady thump of his heartbeat against my cheek and the feel of his fingers as they stroked my hair. Guilt settles somewhere deep in my gut along with many other unsettling emotions, knowing how Sutton would feel if he knew I spent last night in Remi’s bed, even though I’ve spent countless nights sleeping next to Remi over the years.

I don’t have time to give it much thought when Remi’s next words send my brain in an entirely different direction.

“Harris is awake.”

I sit up straighter, feeling my eyes go wide.

“My brother’s attorney just called. My mom and dad are already on their way to his office now.”

“Are they going to release Sutton?” Hope blooms freely in my chest.

“He’ll likely get out on bail today. I guess some of it will depend on whether or not Harris is able to speak to officers and if he is, what he says.”

“So he’s still going to be charged.”

“Unless Harris tells the cops it wasn’t Sutton or he decides he doesn’t want to press charges, but I don’t see that happening. Do you?” He leans down to tug on a sock. “But at least it’s assault and not murder.” The relief on his face is so evident, the words might as well be written across his skin.

“So Harris is the one pressing charges?” I ask, trying to follow exactly what he’s saying, my mind not yet fully operating as sleep still buzzes between my ears.

“The state presses charges if a victim is unable to, but since Harris is awake, technically he could drop the charges or pass the fault onto someone else. That is, if he’s able to talk. I still don’t know what his condition looks like. Just because he’s awake doesn’t mean he’s fully there. He could have brain damage for all we know. You saw him the same as me. Did he look like someone who would just open his eyes and everything would be fine?”

I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to keep me from getting too ahead of myself. The less hopeful I am, the less disappointed I’ll be when this doesn’t

go our way. Only it doesn't matter. If Sutton doesn't walk out of that courtroom a free man today, no amount of hope I have now is going to affect the devastation I will feel.

"We need to go back to the hospital." I shoot up so abruptly that I damn near knock Remi off the side of the bed.

"Slow down, Pen." His head follows me as I scoot to the end of the mattress and quickly push to a stand. "If he's awake, no way officers are going to let you in there to talk to him. At least, not before they do."

"What do you think the odds are that they've already been there?" I hesitate at his bedroom door.

"Not sure. Guess it depends on how motivated they are to figure this out. If it were you lying in that bed, they'd already be there. Harris, on the other hand..."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been on the wrong side of the law more times than he hasn't. According to my brother's attorney, he has a rap sheet a mile long. You work in law. You know how this stuff works."

"I work in business law, not criminal," I remind him.

"But you know that if you're dealing with someone with a checkered past, it's easier to win a case versus pursuing someone who's squeaky clean."

"What does that have to do with the police going to the hospital?"

"They deal with cases like this all the time, most of them innocent people attacked by the likes of Harris and the lot he runs with. Do you really think they're so eager to help him?"

"They seemed awfully eager to arrest your brother," I remind him.

"Because they didn't have a choice. They're required to investigate crimes and to make arrests when adequate evidence is available. It's not like my brother really tried to hide what he was doing. He nearly killed Harris in front of not one, but two witnesses, one of which he went to high school with and was able to identify him. Not even the police can ignore that. Add on the way his hands look and the bloody clothes he tried to hide in the trash, and this case was pretty open and shut."

"They have his bloody clothes?" I ask, having not yet heard this bit of information.

"Do you think they would have booked him if they didn't?"

"How do you know all of this and why am I just hearing about it?"

"I spoke to my father this morning before they left."

“What time is it?” I look around the room, my eyes landing on the clock on the bedside table that reads five after nine. “We have time to make it to the hospital before Sutton’s hearing,” I say, more for my own benefit than Remi’s.

“There’s something else I need to discuss with you.”

“What?” My stomach bottoms out at the way he’s looking at me.

“Sutton has asked that you not come.”

“Not come where?”

“To the courthouse.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I bark out a humorless laugh.

“I’m not. He asked his attorney to pass the message along to my parents.”

“I don’t…” Tears instantly fill my eyes.

“It has nothing to do with you, Pen.” Remi is on his feet in an instant. “He just doesn’t want you to see him like that, in a jumpsuit and handcuffed, and honestly I can’t blame him.” He stops directly in front of me.

“He’s there because of me! How can he ask me not to come?”

“He’s not there because of you.” Remi shakes his head. “He and he alone is responsible for his actions.”

My mind feels like it’s moving a million miles a minute and yet at a snail’s pace at the same time. I can’t process my thoughts fast enough.

“If he thinks I’m not going to show up, then he doesn’t know me very well.”

“And those were my exact words to my father.”

“So you’re not going to try to stop me?”

“Pen, I couldn’t stop you *if* I tried. I told my parents I would request that you stay here with me but that it was very unlikely that you would comply.”

“I’m going to the hospital first,” I say matter-of-factly, giving no room for argument.

“I don’t think it’ll do you any good, but if you’re set on going, we can stop there first.”

“I have to try, Remi. If it could help, I have to. You said so yourself. I may not be able to press charges, but Harris doesn’t know that. Maybe I could… Maybe I can force him to change his story.”

“I was just spit balling last night. I don’t know Harris well enough to know if that tactic would actually work on him.”

“It’s hard to say, but I have to try.”

“I know you do.” He gives me a soft nod.

“Give me twenty minutes,” I tell him, reaching behind me to twist the doorknob before quickly turning and exiting into the hallway without another word.

Exactly twenty minutes later, I’m standing in the foyer dressed in a pencil skirt and long-sleeved silk blouse, thankful that I had clothes like this on hand. *Thank you, work trip.* Speaking of work, I make a mental note to call Charles after Sutton’s hearing. Depending on how this all goes, I may be in Ohio for a bit longer than I anticipated. I can’t imagine they’ll be happy about my impromptu leave of absence, but right now, Sutton is my priority.

I’m tied in knots the entire drive to the hospital. Not once but twice Remi scolds me to slow down, but I’m so eager to get there and get this over with, I feel like I can’t get there fast enough.

The walk inside is even more nerve-racking. My hands are shaking like a leaf by the time we reach the third floor. I half expect one of the nurses at the nurses’ station to stop us as we pass, but neither of them pays us any mind.

I look up and down the hallway, checking for Jean or Rick or a police officer, but the hallway is vacant with the exception of a younger female who approaches from the opposite direction pushing a blood pressure machine.

“Why is there no one here?” I quietly ask Remi, Harris’s room now in my line of sight.

“No idea.” He shrugs.

“You think the police have already been here?”

“It’s possible.” We pull to a stop outside Harris’s door.

“Only one way to find out.” I hesitate. “I need you to... Will you stay out here?”

“Are you sure?” He seems reluctant, to say the least.

“I need to do this on my own.” I give him a reassuring smile, which feels out of place on my face.

“Pen, I don’t like it. What if he does something?”

I pull my phone out of my clutch purse, clicking on the app I use to record client interviews. The idea came to me on the ride over. It certainly can’t hurt my case.

“You saw him yesterday. Do you really believe he’s in a position to hurt me?” I turn my phone inward and move it to the opposite hand, gently placing it back inside my purse.

“Maybe not physically.” He grunts.

“There’s nothing he can do or say that I can’t handle. I got this,” I promise.

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.” I blow out a slow breath before quietly pushing open the heavy wood door.

Like yesterday, the room is dim. The blinds are drawn and there aren’t any lights on, but because the room faces the current position of the sun, I can see well enough to meet the pair of brown eyes that swing my way. Eyes I had hoped I would never have to look into again. Eyes that darken at the sight of me entering the room.

He waits to speak until the door closes behind me.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist.” His voice is hoarse, almost unrecognizable.

“You’re right. I rather enjoy seeing you like this.” I spit my words like venom. “Seems like karma has finally caught up to you.”

“Has it? Or has it caught up to that *boyfriend* of yours?” He smiles maliciously, wincing at the movement. “Rumor has it he’s sitting in a jail cell right now, and if I have anything to say about it, that’s exactly where he’ll stay. I made sure to confirm with the police this morning that he was the one who attacked me.”

His words only fuel my determination.

“Then you’re going to end up in the cell right next to him.” I stop at the foot of his bed, his eyes tracking me the entire way. Or well, the eye I can see—the other is swollen almost completely shut.

“And how’s that?” He tries to sit up more but quickly decides against it, clearly in more pain than he’s trying to let on.

I can’t find it in myself to feel pity for him, though. Not after everything.

“Well, you see, I had a little chat with the police myself. Turns out, charges of sexual assault against a minor can still be charged up to twenty-five years after the fact. Did you know that?” I run my finger along the railing of his bed, being purposefully arrogant.

His face is so swollen that it’s hard to read his expression, but I can tell I’ve got his attention.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really? Holding me down, forcing your disgusting dick down my throat. Twisting my nipples so hard they bruised. Shoving your fingers inside of me until I bled. None of that sounds familiar?”

“I didn’t make you do anything you didn’t want to do.”

I swear all I see is red and it takes everything I have to keep my composure. I knew this wouldn’t be easy, but it needs to be done.

“I never understood why you didn’t try to have sex with me, but now I get it. You knew that was the only way they could possibly trace anything to you. They can’t prove that your fingers were inside me, or that you got off inside my mouth.” The thought makes bile rise in my throat. “But if you fucked me, now that they could prove.”

“It’s my word against yours. You’ll never be able to prove anything, and I’ll get to sit back and watch that boyfriend of yours rot in a fucking prison cell.”

“Did you like it? The power you felt over me.” I refuse to let him derail me. “Looking down at me on my knees, knowing I wasn’t strong enough to fight back. Knowing no one would believe me? Did it give you pleasure to see me like that? I bet it did. I bet it made you so hard. And I’m willing to bet you’ve been chasing that high ever since and that I’m not the only one you’ve sexually assaulted.”

“You always were an attention hungry bitch. But if you’re so curious about how it made me feel, you’ll be disappointed. You gave a lousy fucking blow job and I was glad to be rid of you.”

“You know, I’m glad you didn’t die because now you finally get to answer for everything you did to me.”

“You can’t prove anything.”

“You sure about that?” I tap my finger on the foot railing of the bed. “Did you really think I walked away from that house without taking a shred of evidence with me?” I’m bluffing, of course I am, but he doesn’t know that.

Eight years ago his mother stepped in, fearful that I would hurt her son, or worse, go to the police. Things stopped abruptly after that. He never touched me again. Then again, I didn’t give him any real chance to either considering I made a point to never be home alone with him ever again. I didn’t care about proving what he did. I just wanted it to stop.

“You know, it’s funny, you were always so predictable. Always waited until no one else was home. You made it all too easy to lay the trap. I have you on video, Harris. I have you forcing yourself into my mouth. You hitting me and telling me to shut up as I cried, begging you to stop. Why do you think your mom told you to stay away from me? Because I told her about the video and warned her if you didn’t stop, I’d take it to the police.”

I almost don't expect him to believe me, but the panic that slides through his eyes tells me otherwise. I got lucky on the Jean part. I did tell her I was going to bite his dick off if he tried to stick it in my mouth again, but I had no proof of what he was actually doing, not that any of them know that.

"If that's true, why wait until now? Why not take it to the police all those years ago?"

"Because I needed a place to live and while I hated being with your family, I wasn't willing to risk the alternative. For all I knew, I'd end up somewhere even worse. So, I ensured you wouldn't touch me again and I stored the video in case one day I might need it. And now here we are." I gesture around the room. "Why do you think Sutton came for you? Why do you think he beat you half to death? Because after I learned you were harassing the Barnetts, I showed him the video. I showed him what you did to me. You're lucky you're alive right now. I have no doubt that he had every intention of killing you. But now you get to face a different kind of justice." I lift my hand, turning it to look at my nails like I couldn't be more bored with this conversation.

I have no idea how I appear to him on the outside, but on the inside, I'm shaking so violently it feels like I'm in the middle of a magnitude nine earthquake.

"What do you want?" he finally asks after a long moment of silence stretches between us.

"Drop the charges against Sutton. Tell them you initiated the fight and he was only defending himself. You do that, and the video disappears. You don't, and I promise I will bury you. I will find your other victims, because I know they're out there, and when we're done with you, you won't see the outside of a jail cell for the rest of your life."

"You're lying. You don't have shit on me."

"You wanna mess around and find out?" I slowly make my way around the side of the bed, my heels clicking on the tile floor with each step I take. "Drop the charges, or your days as a free man are over."

"They'll never believe I started the fight."

A high-pitched laugh escapes my throat, causing his one good eye to widen.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You were serious." I laugh again. "Sutton has already claimed self-defense. All you have to do is substantiate his claims. You do that, and all of this goes away."

“How do I know you won’t turn in the video the second I drop the charges?”

“Because all I want is Sutton free.”

He hesitates far too long for my liking, causing beads of sweat to form at the nape of my neck.

“Fine.” He finally grunts, anger tugging at his swollen features.

Relief and something that feels a lot like victory fill my chest, but I’m careful to keep it from showing on my expression.

“And if I find out you go anywhere near Randel and Summer Barnett again, you won’t wake up in a hospital. You’ll end up in a morgue. Am I clear?” I grab the remote lying next to him, pressing the button to call the nurse before making my way to the door. “You have ten minutes to make the call.” With that, I tug the handle and exit into the hallway, the door snapping closed behind me seconds before I collapse into Remi’s waiting arms.

“Jesus, Pen, you’re trembling. Are you okay?”

It takes me a few seconds to gather myself enough to step out of his embrace and look up at him.

“Better than okay.” A smile touches my lips as I reach for my bag. Pulling out my cell phone, I turn it toward Remi so he can see the audio recorder that’s still running.

“You recorded him.” His words are full of pride.

“I did. I don’t think it’s enough to do anything, but I needed a plan B.”

“Plan B for what?”

“In case he didn’t take the bait.”

“What bait?”

“Come on, I’ll explain everything on the way to the police station.” I grab his forearm and pull him alongside me just as a nurse passes us and disappears inside Harris’s room.

“The police station? Shouldn’t we head to the courthouse?”

“Sutton isn’t going to the courthouse,” I tell him. “He’s coming home.”

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Chapter Fourteen

Sutton



“Time already?” I grumble, pushing to a stand when Baldy appears in front of my cell, unlocking the door before pushing it open. I had expected to see my attorney one more time before my hearing, but I guess that isn’t going to happen.

“The heavens have smiled upon you today, son.” He gives me what can only be called a smile but doesn’t quite look like a smile at all.

“Huh?” I snort, not sure how the fuck he would deem my current predicament anything but the hell it is. If I thought I could handle jail, I was wrong. I’ve been here one night and already I’m desperate for home. Desperate for freedom. Desperate for *her*.

Aspen. Just thinking her name causes my heart to knock violently against my ribs. For all I know, she hates me, and really, who could blame her? I sure as shit know I wouldn’t. And yet, even knowing that, I still can’t bring myself to fully regret my actions. I regret where they led me, but not what I did.

He’ll live, of that much I was informed this morning. I can only assume that’s what the officer is referring to, though I’m not sure if I’m more relieved or irritated by this fact. Part of me wanted him to die. A large part of me, in fact. Though I’m not sure what that says about me, that I wished another human dead, but there it is.

Without another word, the officer leads me down the hall and into a similar room they brought me into after I was arrested.

“You can gather your things at the desk through that door,” he informs me and only then do I realize he never bothered to cuff me.

“My things?” I hitch a brow, confusion tugging at my features.

“You’re free to go, Mr. Barnett.”

“Wait, what?” Excitement spurs in my gut, but I quickly squash it down, not wanting to get too ahead of myself.

“Mr. McKinney recanted the statement he gave this morning. Said that he attacked first and you were forced to defend yourself. All charges have been dropped.” He doesn’t seem all that happy about this fact, clearly not buying the turn this story has taken.

Truth be told, I’m pretty fucking confused about it myself.

“So I’m free, free? Like no court, nothing?”

“No charges, nothing to prosecute. You can gather your things through that door,” he repeats his earlier instructions.

I don’t wait to be told a third time. Without a word, I take off through the room, emerging on the other side that leads me into a lobby type area. Not the front lobby of the station, but there is a desk manned by two officers and a small waiting area.

“Name,” a middle-aged, female officer asks, barely even glancing at me.

“Sutton Barnett.” I clear my throat.

She turns and grabs a shallow, rectangular bin, then slides it across the counter to me. After telling me where to change, she turns her attention back to the computer screen in front of her.

After slipping into yet another room, this one much smaller with nothing more than four walls and a bin for the hideous jumpsuits they force you to wear, I make quick work of changing back into my own clothes.

I have no idea what to think or feel. I was prepared for many scenarios, but to walk free—yeah, that wasn’t one I even dared to entertain because I knew it would never happen. And yet here I am, being released like nothing ever happened.

Once changed, I’m escorted back the way I came and then down another hall before finally emerging into the main lobby.

“Keep yourself out of trouble, Mr. Barnett.” Baldy squares his shoulders. “You may not be so fortunate next time.”

I don’t stick around to question why my release seems to irritate him. I already know why he is. Because he knows I’m guilty, and he’s not wrong. I am guilty. But for reasons I don’t yet fully understand, Harris decided to drop all charges, and this comes just an hour after my attorney had informed me that they were moving forward with the charge of assault and some other bullshit charges they decided to tack on for good measure.

So the biggest question on my mind right now shouldn’t be a surprise. What happened this morning that made him change his story?

Pushing my way through the doors, I smile when the morning sun hits my skin and a cool breeze brushes my face, doing a quick survey of my surroundings.

And that's when I see her, standing across the street, hands knotted in front of her, a nervous smile tugging at her lips. A beacon of light calling me home.

I barely look both ways before I'm crossing the street toward her, so fucking eager to reach her I doubt I would slow down for anything. And then she's in my arms, the scent of her hair filling my nose, and I'm pretty fucking sure I've died and gone to heaven.

That has to be it. Someone must have murdered me in my cell and this is fucking heaven. There can't be any other explanation.

I've spent the last twenty-four hours so tied in knots I felt like I couldn't breathe, and only now can I take my first real breath, and God does it feel good.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur, pulling back enough that I'm able to cup her face in my hands. "I'm so fucking sorry," I repeat.

"I know." Unshed tears fill her eyes.

"You asked me not to—"

"What's done is done." She doesn't let me finish. "All I care about is that you're here with me now."

"He dropped the charges." I pull my hands away when she breaks my gaze, telling me everything I need to know in that one simple motion. "It was you." I shake my head in disbelief. "You got him to drop the charges. You went to see him." I say it as I realize it, the pieces sliding into place.

"I did." She doesn't shy away from the anger suddenly spilling from every fucking pore in my body.

"After everything he did..." I swallow hard. "How could you stand to be in the same room with that motherfucker?" My nostrils flare as I fight to hold my temper in place. "What did you promise him? What did you sacrifice in order to get me free?" I hate how accusatory I sound.

"What I had to," she bites, repeating the very thing I said to her as the officers cuffed me and led me away. "And I won't apologize for it." She takes a full step back and I instantly miss the warmth of her closeness.

"Coop."

"You aren't allowed to be angry with me. Harris... What he did to me. That's *my* life. *My* past. And how I deal with that is *my* business. You

inserted yourself into something I asked you not to. You didn't consider what your actions would do to me, what they would force me to then have to do, so don't stand there on your high horse and act like I did something wrong." Her chin quivers the way it always does right before she starts crying.

The sight feels like a thousand-pound sledgehammer colliding with my chest.

"You're right." My voice goes soft. "Everything that's happened, it's all my fault. But I couldn't... I couldn't fucking breathe knowing he was out there, just walking free." I shake my head, emotion boiling into my words. "Even now, I'd walk back into that jail and let them lock me up all over again if I knew I'd rid the earth of that sick son of a bitch."

"You think I don't feel the same way? You think it doesn't bother me that he didn't pay for what he did? It's eaten at me for years. Followed me everywhere I go. I got so used to lugging around the extra weight that after a while I almost forgot I was carrying it. But you, you changed all of that. You forced me to face what I had spent years trying to ignore. You can't be angry at me for going to see Harris, because it was something I needed to do, and not just for you, but for me too. You think it hurts you knowing what he got away with? Imagine how I feel. Imagine how I feel knowing he could be out there doing it to other girls because I didn't have the courage to come forward when there was something that could actually be done about it. I let him abuse me. I could have asked for help and I didn't."

"You were a child."

"You're right, I was. But I'm not anymore. And while it's too late to get any real kind of justice in a court of law, at least he knows now. He knows he can never hurt me again."

"What did you do?" I stop to actually ask the right question. "How did you get him to drop the charges?"

"I blackmailed him."

"You what? How?"

"I told him I had a video of the abuse. That I had set my phone up to record him so that I could prove what he was doing to me and that if he didn't drop the charges and back your story of self-defense, I was going to take it to the police."

"And he believed you?"

"He's too ignorant to even realize I didn't have a cell phone back then, or that even if I did, we were both minors and they likely wouldn't be able to do

that much to him given the amount of time that's passed. I talked to an officer the day you were arrested and filed an official report, so I pretty much knew there wasn't really anything legal I could do and even if I did, it wouldn't be worth the money or pain dragging it all back up would cause. But Harris didn't know that."

"How did you know it would work?"

"I didn't." She shrugs. "But I would have done anything to have you standing in front of me right now. Facing him was easier than facing a life without you in it."

"Coop." I blow out a puff of air. "You did all that for me." It's not a question. As angry as I am for knowing she was in the same room as that fucker, I can't deny how it feels knowing how fiercely she was willing to fight for me.

"I love you, Sutton. I think I fell in love with you the first time I ever saw you. You are the most infuriating and stubborn person I have ever met, but I think that only makes me love you more. No matter how furious I am at you for what you did, a part of me is grateful too. Because you forced me to face something I wouldn't have otherwise faced. I would have continued to carry it with me, something to hold me back and weigh me down, but now, I see it as something to propel me forward. I may not be able to change what Harris did to me, but I can make something good of it and I have you to thank for that. You keep turning my life upside down and yet every time I land, I see that it's exactly where I needed to be. That's how I know."

"Know what?"

"That you really are the one I was always meant to be with. I love it when I'm proven right." When she smiles, it's like my entire world brightens. Everything that was, no longer matters. All that matters now is what is.

"I love you," I tell her, having never uttered truer words in my life.

"I love you, too."

She's back in my arms in an instant, tipping her chin up to me.

"Promise me that this is the end of this. I need to hear you say it."

"I promise."

"The last time you said that, you lied. I need to know I can trust you and take you at your word."

"You can." I lean down so that our noses touch. "I won't lie to you again."

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Her hands slide into the back of my hair. “We should get you back to your parents’ house. I know everyone is eager to see you.”

“In a second. There’s something I want to do first.”

“And what’s that?”

“This.”

I press my lips to hers and kiss her long and deep, not the least bit bothered by the fact that we’re standing in the middle of a public sidewalk, across the street from the police station I spent last night inside of.

I spent twenty-four hours not knowing when or if I’d ever get to kiss her again. Something like that changes a man and puts a lot of things into perspective, like what my brother sacrificed to see her happy. He stepped aside because he knew I was who she wanted. I think it’s about time I start acting like a man who deserved such a gift.



“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Aspen speaks into the darkness, her arm draped across my stomach.

“Did you really think you’d get rid of me that easily?” I tease, running my fingers through her hair, which hangs freely down her bare back.

“I’m serious. I was scared, Sutton.”

“I know.” I kiss the top of her head. “I was too.”

“I kept thinking about all the things we’ve yet to experience together and how we may never get the chance.”

“But I’m here now. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

“Tomorrow isn’t guaranteed. Nothing is certain. How do I know that tonight isn’t the last night I’ll ever get to spend in your arms?”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“It’s true, though.” She shifts onto her elbow and even though I can’t see her face, I know she’s looking up at me. “I’ve wasted so many years hiding from what happened to me, allowing it to hold me back. I don’t want to do that anymore. When I die, I want to know that I lived my life as fully as I could. That I took risks. That I was fearless. I want to take my last breath knowing there isn’t a single thing I would do differently.”

“Coop.” I grin when I feel the warmth of her lips on my chest.

“I want to experience everything life has to offer, Sutton. And I want to experience it with you.” She moves lower, trailing soft kisses down my ribs and across my abdomen.

“Is this your way of telling me you’re ready to marry me?” I ask, hopeful. I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. I know what I want. I don’t need to wait weeks or months or even years to be sure. Aspen is it for me. She’s the only thing I will ever need.

“I am.” I feel her move but don’t realize what she’s doing until I feel her tug the blanket away, the warmth of her breath against my shaft seconds later taking me from semi to rock-hard in a fucking instant. I don’t have time to focus on her words as her actions have my mind completely captivated. “But first, I thought maybe I’d indulge in a different kind of experience.” She flicks her tongue across the head of my dick and my entire body tenses.

“Are you sure about this, Coop?” I can’t help but ask. I remember her reaction the first time I attempted this with her, which now I understand better than I knew I could. And I certainly don’t want her to feel pressure from me. “As much as I want this, I’m in no rush.”

“I am.” She swirls the tip before pulling it into her mouth. “I’ve wanted to do this for so long.” Another pull, a little deeper this time. “But I was too scared. I’m done being afraid.” When she takes me fully into her mouth, I damn near whimper, my head dropping back onto the pillow.

I imagined what this would be like a million times over, but nothing could have prepared me for how fucking incredible it would feel to be inside her mouth. To feel her hand pump my shaft while her lips draw me in as far as she can, swirling her tongue like she knows exactly what to do to make my balls tighten, and tighten do they ever. Fuck, within sixty seconds I’m barely hanging on by a thread.

“Fuck.” I groan, my hand finding the top of her head, but I make no attempt to push or grab her hair like I want to. I know what a big step this is for her and I don’t want to do anything to make her feel uncomfortable.

She must know where my thoughts have gone because seconds later she reaches up, pressing her hand on top of mine as she urges me to be more aggressive with her.

I take my cues from her, easing in slowly as I lift my hips up and down, holding her in place but careful not to push too hard. It goes against every instinct I have. With any other girl, I would have my hands on both sides of

her head, holding her still while I fucked her mouth so hard she gagged and choked on my cock. But that was before Aspen. Before I understood what it meant to love someone. Before when something like having your dick sucked was for nothing more than pleasure. Now, it all means more. She isn't just sucking me off. She's sharing a piece of herself with me, an intimate part that she's never freely given to anyone else.

When she cups my balls with her free hand and gives them a gentle squeeze, I lose the battle, exploding like a fucking canon as I spill my release between her pretty pink lips. She drinks it up greedily, not surfacing until she has lapped up and swallowed every drop, by which time, I'm fucking breathless.

"Holy shit." I grab her arm, pulling her on top of me. "That was..." Words fail me as I kiss her lips, tasting the saltiness of my release there.

"Did I... did I do okay?"

I roll abruptly, taking her with me. "Are you fucking kidding me?" I groan, pressing her into the mattress with my full weight so she can feel that I'm still so hard for her. "You were incredible. More than incredible. By far the best I've ever experienced."

"You're just saying that."

"I'm not. I mean every word." I kiss her again. "And it means a lot to me that you felt comfortable enough to do it. How was it for you?"

"So much better than I thought it would be." I can see the smile on her lips as if the room were suddenly flooded with light. "I wasn't sure if I could... But it was exciting, knowing that I was giving you such pleasure."

"I know what you mean." I kiss her neck and then her collarbone, shifting lower. "Because now all I can think about is doing the same for you."

Her breath quickens at the promise in my words. A promise I spend the next several minutes making damn good on.

By the time I'm done, she's begging for me to be inside of her, and I am all too happy to oblige.

It isn't until later, as we're lying in bed, tangled in each other's arms, that I revisit something she said earlier.

"Coop," I whisper into the darkness.

"Yeah."

"Did you mean what you said, about being ready to marry me?"

"I did." She kisses my chest where her face is currently buried, her head resting on my arm as we face each other.

“Does tomorrow work for you?”

Her light chuckle vibrates against my skin.

“I’d marry you tonight if I could.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“I’m ready to start my life with you, Sutton.”

“Someone is going to have to break the news to Remi.”

“I’ll do it.” She’s quick to volunteer.

“No,” I disagree. “I already said I would. Let me do it. He’s my brother. I owe him that much.”

“Okay.”

“So then tomorrow you’ll be my wife.”

“Well, we may need a little more time than a day, but yes, once you talk to Remi, we can start planning.”

“And then forever?” I squeeze her tighter.

“And then forever.”



“I still can’t believe these last couple of days. Something out of a fucking movie.” My brother takes a seat on the bench beside me, stretching his feet out in front of himself.

It’s not the warmest day to take a walk to the park, but I felt like this is a conversation I needed to have with Remi away from my parents and Aspen. A place where he’d be forced to hear me out, or at least a place I hope he will. And since our flight leaves tomorrow, I knew this would likely be my last chance and I wanted to do it before we head to D.C.

“Yeah,” I agree, more nervous than I expected to be.

I never cared much about what my brother thought of me in the past, but now, what he thinks and feels means a great deal to me. And not just because it means a lot to Aspen.

Before she came into my life, I pushed away anyone who might care about me. I don’t actually know why. There’s no rhyme or reason for it, but I did. I pushed away potential relationships, my brother, and even my own fucking parents. I didn’t want to let anyone too close. But Aspen has changed

all of that. Don't get me wrong, opening up to people is still extremely hard for me, but for her, there isn't a damn thing on this earth I wouldn't do.

"So, why don't you tell me why you brought me all the way out here? I'm assuming whatever it is, you're pretty certain I'm not going to like it."

"What makes you so sure?"

He arches a knowing brow in my direction, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"Because I'm not an idiot."

"Never thought you were." I mirror his action, stretching my legs out in front of me. I keep my hands exposed to the cool wind, though, in case I need to throw them up to protect my face when my brother decides to take a swing at me, which is a very real possibility.

"No, that you are not," I agree, blowing out a puff of air. "Before I say anything, I need you to promise to hear me out."

"I promise I'll do my best." His head swings in my direction, curious eyes meeting mine. "That's the best I can do until I hear what you have to say."

"I need you to know that I love her, Rem. With everything that I am." I start, choosing my words carefully. "I know I fucked up. I know these past few days have been a shit show of epic proportions, but I'm done with that now. My one and only priority is Aspen. I know you probably hate me for all of this..." I gesture at nothing in particular.

"I don't hate you," he grumbles.

"Well, I wouldn't blame you if you did. I would probably hate me too if I were in your shoes."

"When I found out what he did to her—when she actually confirmed it—I wanted to kill him, too. I can't blame you for doing something I likely would have done if you hadn't already."

"But it's not just about the past few days. It's about everything. Everything I put you through. The hurt I know I caused you. I want the chance to make it right with you too, Brother. So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for keeping my relationship with Aspen a secret. I'm sorry for lying to you. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I put you in a position to have to deal with my irrational choices yet again. I'm just fucking sorry."

"I appreciate that. Truly, I do. But I'm not worried about myself..."

"You're worried about her," I confirm what I already know. "But you don't need to. I will spend every moment I have on this earth loving her with

everything that I am. Which is why I asked you here. I..." I hesitate before finally blurting the words. "I've asked Aspen to marry me, and she said yes."

He draws back, the impact of my words like a punch to his face.

"I'm sorry, what?" He shakes his head. "Marriage? You haven't even lived together yet..."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing will change the way I feel about her. I know I want her as my wife. I won't ever want anyone but her."

"You say that now, but you can't know that. Look at you, look at how you've treated women who have loved you over the years."

"But she changed me, Rem. She made me want to be a man worthy of calling her my wife."

"And look what you've done with that. Two days ago, she didn't know if she'd ever see you as a free man again. While I get why you did what you did—trust me, I understand better than anyone else could—what happens the next time someone does something to piss you off where she's concerned? You've always been a hothead, Sut, and you'll always be one. You'll bring her more grief than anything else. You can't possibly believe that you're the kind of man who can make her happy."

"I do, Brother. I know I can. And she knows it, too. Which is why she agreed. Look"—I scrub my hands down the front of my jeans to warm them—"we don't need your permission. Whether you approve or not, Aspen *will* be my wife, and soon. We want your blessing, Rem, but we don't need it."

"Then why the fuck are we here?"

"Because I spent months keeping the truth from you and in the end, we all suffered for it. I don't want to lie to you anymore, Rem. I don't want to walk on eggshells around you, afraid that I'm going to piss you off or hurt your feelings. *You* came to me, remember? *You* acknowledged that I was the one she wanted. *You* conceded because you knew I could make her happy. Are you saying now that you were wrong?"

He doesn't have an immediate response, so instead, he just stares at me for a long moment.

"You're right." He finally speaks after too long, running a hand through his messy hair, pushing it away from his face. "I made a decision to do what I thought was best for Pen. And *you* were what I thought was best. I knew she loved you the instant I found you two together that night and I tried to force her not to. I wanted her to choose me, but I see now it was more about her not choosing you. Aspen and I are bound together in a way no one will ever

understand, but I know, deep down, we were never meant to be more than what we are now. And as much as I think this is a horrible idea, I won't try to stop you, not if it's what Aspen wants. I may not always like it, but I tried to stand in the way of you two once before and I almost lost her because of it. I won't make that mistake a second time."

"I can't tell you what that means to me." I briefly clasp him on the shoulder. "What it will mean to her. And I promise you right here and now, I won't stand in the way of what you two have. I may not always understand it, and yes, sometimes it may even drive me mad with jealousy, but those are my issues and not hers, and I won't project them onto her. I know how much you mean to her, Rem. And believe it or not, you mean a lot to me, too. I know I may not have always shown it, but you're my brother, the only one I've got, and I love you."

"As much as it pains me to say"—a smile tugs at his lips—"I love you, too. You've been a pain in my ass more times than not, but you're right, we're brothers and some things are just bigger than childish rivalries. But so help me, Sut, if you hurt her, it'll be me sitting in a jail cell and you in a hospital bed, you got me?"

"You don't have to worry about that, Rem. I'm not going to hurt her."

"You say that now, but just know if you ever do, I don't care if it's thirty years from now, what you did to that junkie piece of shit will look like child's play." He abruptly pushes to a stand. "Now, can we please head back to the house? I'm freezing my fucking balls off out here."

I bark out a laugh, shaking my head as I rise.

"Sure, but first, I need a favor."

"Because you haven't already asked enough," he mutters, but I choose to ignore it.

This has gone a hell of a lot better than I was honestly expecting it to and I'm not going to let the bridge I've built start to crumble before we've even fucking walked on it.

"I need you to talk to Aspen. She won't say it outright, but I know she's worried that our choices are going to hurt you. Even if I tell her you're okay with it, she's not going to be fully at ease until she hears it from your lips."

"I can do that. But not because you asked me to. I'll do it for her."

"That's good enough for me."

I know Remi and I have a long way to go and the only reason he's probably not pushing me in front of a moving car right now is because of

Aspen, but I can't help but feel hopeful that maybe one day it won't be that way. Maybe one day he'll look at me as a friend and not just his pain-in-the-ass brother he's forced to put up with.

"So, have you two discussed when and where this marriage thing is going down?" he finally asks after a long beat. "I assume I'm the best man and if I'm not, I will fucking riot." He snorts, matching my stride as we make our way back toward the house.

"The sooner, the better. That's all I know. We were thinking something private, just her and I, maybe an elopement, but I think it's only fitting that we open up the invitation to one more. What are we if not some fucking weird-ass triangle?"

"You mean to tell me you two plan to elope without Mom and Dad? Do you have a death wish?" He throws me a sideways glance, completely bypassing the triangle comment.

"Maybe." I shrug. "But Aspen doesn't want a wedding and honestly, neither do I. We just want to be husband and wife."

"I never thought I'd see the day," he murmurs so quietly I almost don't catch his words.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "I was just saying I never thought I'd see the day."

"The day for what?"

"That my whore of a brother would finally find a woman he deemed worthy of settling down for. Of course it had to be *my* best friend... Figures." He scuffs the toe of his shoe into the sidewalk.

"You know, for someone who's no stranger to various different women in his bed, you sure are quick to call me out on it. And for the record," I quickly continue before he can comment. "Unlike you, who shuffles women in and out one after the other, I had long-standing affairs with only a handful of women since high school. Mutually beneficial relationships where we both got something out of it. So really, who's the whore?"

"Is that what Olivia was to you, a mutually beneficial relationship?"

"Yes. She went into our arrangement knowing the terms. And like the others, I ended the relationship when she started expecting more."

"Really? Because from the way she tells it, *she* ended the relationship after she found out you were fucking Aspen while she slept in the next room over. Or did she get that part wrong?"

“She told you that?”

“We’re friends. You gotta problem with that?”

“Not a single one. In fact, if you’re interested in more than friendship, have at it.”

“Oh no, Brother, I have a strict *no sticking my dick where my brother’s has been* rule. You understand.”

“Fair.” I chuckle. “So no to Olivia. But what about someone else?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have any interest in a serious relationship?” I ask because I honestly don’t know. It’s not like it’s something Remi and I have ever really talked about.

“Not sure. I guess if the right person comes along.”

“Well, if you’re anything like me, it’ll hit you when you least expect it.”

“Maybe...” he trails off for a long moment. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re not going to spend the rest of your life rotting behind bars.”

“Yeah, you and me both.” My shoulders shake in silent laughter, though I don’t find anything funny about how real that almost became. “I hear I have you to thank. You’re the one who gave Aspen the idea.”

“I was just popping off at the mouth. She was the one who made it happen. You should have seen Pen. I’ve never seen her so fucking determined. So brave. You gave her something to fight for bigger than herself. You should be proud of her. I know I am.”

“How could I not be?” I slow as our parents’ house comes into view. “She really is incredible, and not just because of what she did to save my ass. I couldn’t understand it before, why you cared for her the way you did, why she was the most important person to you, why no one else ever seemed to matter, but I do now. She’s special in a way that can’t be easily explained to someone who doesn’t truly know her.”

“She really is,” he softly agrees, turning his gaze to our parents’ house that draws closer with every step we take. “I still can’t believe they’re selling this place.” He abruptly changes the subject and something tells me he does it on purpose. I get it. We’ve said what needed to be said.

“I think it’ll be good for them, and for us.”

“I guess.” He blows out a heavy breath. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’m looking forward to never coming back to this shithole town again. But a part of me is going to miss this place.” He slows to a stop.

“Yeah.” I nod, the memory of the night I crawled into Aspen’s bed after my parents’ vow renewal hitting me like a moving object. I sway slightly from the impact.

I try to imagine where I’d be now if she’d awoken and kicked me out. If she had screamed and pushed me away, but I can’t even picture it. I can’t even consider what a life without her would be like anymore.

“This place definitely holds some good memories.” I finally finish the thought.

“Are you two going to come inside or are you just going to stand there all day?” I startle at the sound of Aspen’s voice, having not realized that she’s sitting on the front swing, wrapped in a thick blanket, watching the two of us.

“Little cold for a swing, don’t ya think?” Remi climbs the steps to the front porch and lifts the blanket enough to slip beneath it as he takes a seat next to Aspen.

“I don’t know, I kind of like the cool air.” She smiles at me as I approach and lift the other side of the blanket.

I don’t wait to be told to slip in next to her on the opposite side as my brother. She drapes the blanket over my lap before taking my hand, entwining our fingers together before turning her eyes back out to the front yard.

“I’m gonna miss this place too,” she admits to no one in particular, having clearly overheard the last part of our conversation.

“Me too,” Remi is the first to answer.

“Yeah,” I agree.

“But I’m also excited for a new beginning.” She smiles softly to herself. “For your parents and for us. Besides, visiting them in Florida will be much nicer than this. Instead of temperamental weather and old buildings, we’ll be looking at white sand and blue water.”

“Florida?” Remi and I question in unison, this being the first time either of us is hearing this. When they said they were moving, they didn’t say where.

“Your mom told me this morning after the offer they made on a condo last week was accepted.”

“Florida,” Remi repeats, letting himself mull the information over. “I can’t say I’m mad at that.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you would be.” Aspen knocks her shoulder against his.

“Christmas on the beach. I think maybe this move isn’t such a bad thing after all.”

“Your sudden change of heart wouldn’t have anything to do with skimpy bikinis and vacation hookups, would it?” I snort out a laugh.

“I mean, that sure as fuck doesn’t hurt.” My brother’s shoulders vibrate with his own laughter.

“You two.” Aspen shakes her head slowly, a smile playing on her lips.

“Not us two,” I quickly disagree. “There’s only one person I want to see in a skimpy bikini, but if I’m honest, I prefer her in nothing at all.” I lean over to drop a kiss to Aspen’s temple.

“How about we save that kind of talk for when I’m not around, yeah?” Remi grimaces.

“I’ll do my best, but I make no promises.” I wink at my brother, who rolls his eyes and turns away.

A long bout of silence stretches between the three of us. It’s strange because normally the quiet would put me on edge, but sitting here with Aspen and Remi, I feel more at peace than I have maybe ever.

I know we still have a lot to figure out and that we’re bound to hit some bumps along the way, but instead of being filled with uncertainty, I’m filled with hope and excitement for what the future holds. Because I know, no matter what happens, as long as Aspen is by my side, there isn’t anything I can’t overcome.

I don’t have to wonder how lucky I am that she’s in my life. I know. And there isn’t a day that’ll go by that I won’t feel grateful that out of billions of people on this planet we call Earth, I’m the one who gets to call her mine.

And fuck if that isn’t the best feeling in the world.

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Chapter Fifteen

Aspen



“So, rumor on the street is you’re getting married.” Remi takes the seat next to mine as we wait for our plane to start boarding.

“Bout time. I was wondering how long it would take you.” I look down the hall, no longer able to see Sutton, who left to get me a drink from the vending machine.

“Are you sure about this, Pen? Marriage? I mean, that’s a really big step. You two haven’t even lived together yet. What if you don’t like the way he leaves his socks all over the place or how he never hangs up his bath towels?”

“You forget, I lived with you,” I point out. “Besides, I don’t care about any of that, Rem.” I grab his hand, giving it a squeeze. “I love him.”

“I know you do. I just... I need to make sure that you’re sure.”

“I am. I want this more than I can easily explain. I know you may not want to hear that, and I know we hurt you a lot getting to this point, but I’m so in love with him that sometimes it physically hurts. Because then I worry about what happens if I lose him.”

“You aren’t going to lose him. I may not have a lot of faith in my brother, but there’s one thing that’s been very clear to me from the beginning. He cares about you more than I thought him capable of caring about another person. And as much as the idea of the two of you getting married unsettles me, if it’s what you truly want, I will stand by you. Always.”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“I love you, too.”

“I know things will be different between us when we get back home. I know things are going to change. But I don’t want *us* to change. I don’t want to lose what we have.”

“You won’t. I would never let that happen. Sutton is just going to have to get used to our weekly movie nights and random outings because I may not

have a choice but to share you, but he can't have all of you. A part of you still belongs to me."

"And always will," I reassure him.

"That's all I needed to hear." He smiles at me, that famous one-sided Remi smile that is so familiar to me I could draw it perfectly from memory alone.

"It's crazy to think how much has changed in the last few months." I spot Sutton coming back up the hallway toward us carrying two bottles of water.

Instead of pulling my hand away like I normally would, I hold Remi's tighter. This is who we are, who we've always been, and if Sutton really wants this—if he really wants me—then he'll learn to accept it, because if I've learned anything from this situation, it's that no good comes from lies or half-truths.

"Yeah, it really is," he agrees just as Sutton stops in front of us.

I don't miss how he glances at our clasped hands, but he doesn't comment on it, nor does he seem upset by it. Apparently, we've made more progress than I realized. I guess spending a full twenty-four hours thinking you lost the other person forever will put things into perspective for a person. I know it sure did for me.

"What are you two talking about?" Sutton hands one of the waters to his brother before taking the seat beside me and extending the other to me. Only then do I release Remi's hand, mainly because I need two hands to unscrew the cap.

"Just reflecting." I give him a soft smile before lifting the bottle to my lips. The cold water feels incredible on my dry throat.

"Seems we've all been doing a lot of that lately." He settles back into his seat, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

"Seems we have," I agree, offering him the water bottle. "You want a drink?"

"No, I'm good." He rests his hand on my thigh. "Better than good actually." He grins at me. "In fact, I feel pretty damn perfect right about now."

"Yeah, well, don't get used to the feeling because you've got about two hours of flight freak-out to look forward to." Remi grunts.

"Flight freak-out?" Sutton arches a brow at his brother over my shoulder.

"Guessing you two have never flown together." He nods, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Stop it.” I smack his chest playfully. “I am not that bad.”

“Are you kidding? I had nail marks in my arm for four hours after we got off our last flight. And let’s not talk about the paper bag.”

“Paper bag?” Sutton laughs.

“Oh yeah, you know...” Remi holds his hands up to represent the paper bag and then starts breathing in and out in a manner that one might if they were hyperventilating.

“Remington Jonathan,” I warn between gritted teeth.

“What? If he’s going to marry you, he needs to know what he’s in for.” Remi’s shoulders shake with laughter.

“I’ll admit”—I look back at Sutton—“I’m not a great flyer. But there are worse things in the world.” I say the last part to Remi.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret.” Sutton leans in so close I can feel his warm breath on my ear. “I don’t like flying either. Guess we’ll just have to suffer together.”

“You don’t?” I draw back to meet his gaze.

“I hate it, actually.”

“But all the times you flew out to see me...”

“Worth every nerve-racking moment.” He gives me a full-blown smile this time and I swear if I weren’t sitting, I’d likely hit the ground from the sight of it.

“I love you,” I mouth, touching the side of his face.

“I love you,” he mouths back and together we share a small private moment before a woman’s voice comes over the speaker, announcing the boarding of our plane.

“Well, guess it’s time.” Remi stands, turning toward his brother. “If you’re going to change your mind, now’s the time.”

“Not a chance in hell.” Sutton stands, quickly helping me to my feet.

“And then there were three,” Remi grumbles. “For the record, I liked it better when there were only two.” He chuckles when I knock my hip into his. “What?” He smiles innocently. “I’m just saying...”

Shaking my head, I turn my attention forward, knowing that this isn’t just a plane ride back to D.C. This is the plane ride that starts the rest of my life. A plane ride that will take me one step closer to the future I used to dream about every night. Fantasize about as I slept on the floor in front of my bedroom door so Harris couldn’t sneak in while I was sleeping.

It's what got me through some of the most difficult times of my life, the hope that one day it could be like this. That one day I could call Sutton Barnett mine. That one day he would love me the way I've always loved him. And now here it is, a reality I never could have foretold.

But that's not to say it didn't come without sacrifice. Because in return for this future that I chose, I had to let Harris go free. I knew I would likely never get justice for what he did to me—the officer I spoke to the day Sutton was arrested pretty much told me as much. The only evidence I had to stand on was the audio recording from the hospital, but if I took it to the police, it would have implicated Sutton just as much as Harris. They would have known that Harris only dropped the charges because I threatened to release a video that didn't actually even exist. So I made a choice.

I made a choice to save Sutton. I made a choice to save myself. I made a choice to stop letting my past dictate my future. I've made my peace the best I know how. I've done all I can do. And yet, there's still this nagging feeling that maybe I can do more. If not for myself, then maybe for other victims out there who have suffered sexual abuse.

I don't know what I'm going to do yet, but I know I'm going to do something. I may not have been able to help myself or see my assailant behind bars, but that doesn't mean I can't give that kind of closure to others.

"You good?" I glance up at Sutton, my heart swelling at the way he looks at me. The gentleness behind his eyes, the softness of his expression. He loves me. Of that, I have no doubt. And I love him, more than I ever thought humanly possible to love another person.

"Better than good." I smile, leaning into his side as we wait to board the plane, Remi standing directly in front of us.

He looks over his shoulder, offering me a small wink. He doesn't have to speak words for me to know what he's saying—*we're going to be okay*. And not just for the plane ride, but as a whole. We're going to be okay—all of us.

And for the first time maybe ever, I actually believe it.



"Well, Mrs. Barnett, how do you feel?"

Mrs. Barnett... I can get used to the sound of that. And I guess I'm going to have to considering it's now my freaking name. I still can't wrap my head around it.

"Amazing, Mr. Barnett. How about yourself?" I giggle, Sutton's weight pressing me deeper into the mattress.

"Like the luckiest fucking man alive." He smiles down at me seconds before his lips find mine, kissing me in a way that makes my toes curl in anticipation of what I know is to come.

If it were up to Sutton, we would have married the second we got off the plane in D.C., but thanks in large part to Remi, I was able to hold him off for two weeks until I could arrange for his parents to join us. I just couldn't imagine doing it without them, not really. They're my parents almost as much as they are his and it just didn't feel right leaving them out. Thankfully, Remi was able to convince Sutton of this fact.

He hasn't said as much, but I think he's glad we waited too. It wasn't anything special when it comes to how one gets married—two people standing in front of a judge while three others stand as witness—but to me it was the absolute best moment of my life and I couldn't have asked for more. It's truly all I ever wanted. To marry the man I love in front of the most important people in my life.

I don't think I'll ever be able to thank Randel and Summer enough for not only welcoming me into their family, but for sharing their two incredible sons with me. One, my best friend. The other, now my husband. I still can't believe this is real life.

And while I know they all thought it was a little fast, they were kind enough not to say too much on the matter. I think they knew it wouldn't change our minds. We knew what we wanted and neither of us wanted to wait. What's the point in delaying the inevitable? Life is too short to do things on a socially acceptable timeline.

"You know, we are going to have to come up for air eventually." I smile against his mouth.

"Fuck air. I've got all I need right here." He slides inside of me without warning, causing me to cry out from the abrupt fullness that seems to stretch me to the brink.

"Exactly how many times are we planning on consummating this marriage?" I bite my lower lip to contain a moan of pleasure that creeps up

my throat as he moves inside of me like someone with the road map to my body, handling me with excellent precision.

“Am I starting to wear you out, dear wife?”

“Maybe a little,” I admit, already deliciously sore. Other than quick trips to the bathroom, we haven’t left this room since he carried me over the threshold damn near eight hours ago. And no, we have not slept a wink during that time. Not that I’m complaining, because I’m definitely not.

“Do you want me to stop?” He slows, smiling when my nails dig into his hips, urging him forward.

“Not yet.” I let my eyes fall closed. “But after this, you have to feed me or I might wither away.”

“Now we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“Keep going.” I bite my lip again, already feeling too close.

“Whatever you wish, Mrs. Barnett. Whatever you desire. I will do anything to make it so.” He hooks his arms under my knees, holding my ass off the bed as he drives deep inside of me, causing me to cry out when he hits just the right spot. “There it is.” I hear the smile in his voice as he repeats the motion over and over again until I’m clawing at the bedsheets and writhing in pleasure.

As soon as one orgasm ends, another begins, and by the time Sutton spills his release inside of me a few moments later, I’m pretty sure I’m going to tear apart at the seams and simply float away in pieces.

Collapsing down on top of me, he buries his face into the crook of my neck. His heart is pounding so hard and fast I can feel the vibration of it against my own chest.

“Can I ask you a question?” he asks after a long beat where he works to catch his breath.

“Anything,” is my immediate response.

“Remember when you said you didn’t want kids...”

My stomach twists at his words, though I’m not sure if it’s because I’m nervous or excited.

“I do.” I run my fingers through the back of his hair, the strands like silk against my fingers.

“Do you really not want them, like ever?”

“I thought I didn’t,” I admit. “I could never imagine bringing a child into this world and risk subjecting them to the kind of life I had. But now...”

He pulls back to look down at me. “Now what?”

“Now I don’t know anymore.”

“So you’re saying you might want kids?”

“I thought you didn’t want any?”

“I didn’t. But now... I don’t know anymore.” He repeats my words back to me. “I guess I just want to know if it’s an option.”

“I’m not ready and I probably won’t be for a long time.”

“I’m not either. I want you to myself too badly to share you more than I already have to.” He doesn’t have to say Remi’s name. We both know who he’s referring to. “But one day, maybe?”

“Maybe.” I agree to something a year ago I would have never even considered.

It’s hard not to think about it when you love someone the way I love Sutton. I want to share everything humanly possible with him. I want little versions of him running around the house, looking up at me with big blue eyes. I used to only see risk. Now I can’t help but see reward.

“Perhaps I should feed you now?” He leans down, pressing a kiss to the tip of my nose.

“My body would thank you.” I smile when he makes no attempt to move. “Or not.”

“Hang on. I just want to look at you for a moment longer.”

I swear my heart does an entire flip inside my chest.

“I’m sure I look amazing.” I snort sarcastically.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I want to commit this image of you to my memory so that I never forget how perfect you look in this moment.”

“Keep talking like that and I might change my mind about the food,” I warn him.

“Don’t tempt me. I’m already having a hard enough time making myself move.” He kisses the tip of my nose a second time before pressing up and reluctantly rolling out of bed.

“You know, I’ve always wondered what it would be like to cook naked. Perhaps I could join you on your quest for food.”

When he smiles this time, I swear it takes over his entire face.

“I knew it!” he announces, extending a hand to help me out of bed.

“Knew what?” I ask, pressing my hands to his bare chest as soon as I’m upright.

“That you were the perfect woman for me.” He pulls me close, forcing me to lean my head back in order to look up at him.

“You’re just now figuring that out?” I tease.

“No, I’ve known it all along.” His hand slides across my cheek, cupping my face. “I think I might have even known it back then.” He doesn’t have to clarify for me to know what he’s referring to. “I treated you the way I did because deep down I think I knew; I knew you could be the real thing and it terrified me. But I’m not scared anymore. I’m going to spend every day of the rest of my life loving you the way I couldn’t all those years ago.”

“You can start.” I drape my arms around his neck. “By getting some food in my belly.”

My feet abruptly leave the ground as Sutton hoists me up so that I’m at eye level with him. I swear, I could spend a lifetime counting the tiny specks of gold that pepper the most brilliant blue eyes I’ve ever stared into.

“Tell me you love me.” He kisses the corner of my mouth.

“I love you,” I say softly, my hands once again sliding into his dark hair. “I love you.” I kiss his cheek. “I love you.” His other cheek. “I love you.” His forehead. “I love you.” I continue to pepper kisses everywhere I can reach before making my way to his lips. “I love you,” I repeat one last time, a whisper against his mouth.

“You have made me happier than I ever dreamed possible, do you know that?”

“Good.” I lay a quick peck to his lips before pulling back. “Then we’re even.”

“Now until forever.”

“Now until forever,” I confirm, sealing the promise with a kiss.

I know it won’t always feel this perfect.

I know there will be good times and bad times. Times when it’s hard to look at him and times, like now, when I simply can’t get enough. Times when we’ll laugh and times when we’ll cry. And I’m ready for all of it. Every minute of it, and there isn’t a single second with Sutton that I won’t treasure.

I don’t have to wonder how rare a love like ours is. I know. And I will cherish it, I will cherish him, now until the end of my days... and maybe even after.

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Epilogue

Remi



Five years later...

“Again, Rem Rem, again.” My nephew Rand bounces in my arms, his blue eyes wide with excitement.

“Again? Are you sure? You’re not gonna puke on me now, are you?” I tap his little nose with my finger.

“Rem Rem.” He throws his head back on a giggle that is hands down my favorite sound in the world.

I never expected to be an uncle. In truth, I never thought Sutton would settle down with anyone long enough to have a child, at least not one that he wanted. And Pen, well, I always understood why she was opposed to the idea. I can’t imagine many people with her past would be eager to procreate and risk subjecting another generation to such heartaches. But a lot has changed in the last five years, the biggest one being this little bundle of cuteness that came into the world exactly two years ago today and who loves when Uncle Rem Rem plays the toss game.

“Okay, if you promise.” I grin, tossing him a couple feet into the air before catching him easily, his squeal of delight bouncing off the walls around us.

“Again, again.”

“I think maybe it’s time we give Rem Rem a break, don’t you?” Aspen appears in the entryway of the living room, her hand resting on her very pregnant belly.

When she told me she was pregnant again so soon after Rand, I wasn’t the least bit surprised. I remember shortly after she had him, Sutton was already talking about how he loved him so much he couldn’t wait to fill the house with ten more. Though Pen is pretty adamant that three is her max.

“Mama,” Rand whines dramatically.

“Memaw and Pop Pop are going to be here soon. Maybe you should go clean up your toys out of the dining room.”

“No!” He arches his back in my arms, nearly bending himself in half, his head damn near hanging upside down.

“If you don’t clean up your toys, you don’t get birthday cake,” she tells him, her voice almost melodic.

Pen is a saint when it comes to Rand. She never yells. She never gets frustrated or angry, at least not in front of her son, and she always knows exactly what to say to get him to do what she wants. Honestly, she kind of reminds me of my own mother. Loving. Attentive. Would burn the world down for her child. And she would too.

“Birthday cake!” When he pops up on a squeal, I quickly lower him to his feet, laughing as he scurries away, his dark hair swaying from side to side.

He looks so much like my brother it’s uncanny. Though if you ask me, he’s way cuter than Sutton ever was.

“Boy loves cake.” I plop down on the couch, patting the spot next to me. “You look like you need to rest your feet for a bit.” I smile when she takes the seat beside me, leaning into me when I drop an arm over her shoulder.

“Is that your way of telling me I look like shit?” she grumbles, propping her feet up on the ottoman.

“Never.” I nudge her gently. “But you have been cooking all day, despite my offer to help.”

“You are helping. Keeping Rand occupied is more helpful than anything you could do in the kitchen.”

“Because I’m a bad cook?”

“Because you’re a great uncle.” She smiles up at me, even more beautiful today than she was the first day I saw her.

It’s crazy to think how much has happened since then. How much has changed. And yet, weirdly, I feel like we all ended up exactly where we were meant to be.

Aspen and Sutton are perfect together. I never thought I’d say it, but it’s true. The way he looks at her, the way she looks at him, you can tell how madly in love they are.

Five years ago, that might have bothered me, but not today. Today all I can see is the beauty of what they share and feel extremely grateful that my best friend, and my brother, have found true happiness in this life. It’s all I ever really wanted for them anyway.

Things have changed between me and Pen, of course they have, but we're still the same crazy kids we've always been. Even with how hectic life has become, we still make time for each other because we understand how special what we share is. Even Sutton has gotten used to our antics over the years and just shrugs us off without a second thought. He knows my love for her isn't the same as his and over time we've reached a kind of mutual understanding, the two of us. And while we're closer now than we've ever been, I don't think my relationship with Sutton will ever hold a candle to my one with Aspen.

Friendships like the one Pen and I have don't come around every day. I think in a way, that's why I was so desperate to keep her and Sutton apart in the beginning. Because I feared that if someone else came into her life, I'd somehow be less important. That I'd have to be everything to her if I wanted to be anything at all, but that simply isn't true.

"What time is that dipshit husband of yours supposed to be home?" I finally ask after a long moment.

"That dipshit is your brother," she needlessly reminds me. "And he should be back anytime now. Your parents' plane landed nearly an hour ago."

"You would think they would have flown in yesterday rather than showing up the day of their only grandson's second birthday party."

"Considering they just got home from their cruise yesterday, I'm surprised they're able to make it at all."

"Crazy kids. I swear, it's like they retired and suddenly now they're fun."

"I think maybe they were always fun, but you just couldn't see it because they were your parents," she tells me.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Trust me, it's different when you have a little person watching your every move, learning directly from you. I slipped up and said shit the other day when I stubbed my toe and Rand ran around the house all day saying *shit, shit, shit*."

"He didn't." I bark out a laugh.

"Oh, he did." She shakes her head, a wide smile on her face.

"Just wait, you're about to have a girl. You know what they say about girls," I tease.

"That one girl is harder than five boys. Yes, you've reminded me several times since learning you were going to have a niece. But I don't think that

will be the case with *my* daughter.” She runs both hands along her pregnant belly.

“And why is that?”

“Because she’s going to be a perfect little angel.”

“You hope anyway. My bet, she’ll be a little demon child because she’ll have Sutton so wrapped around her finger that he’ll let her get away with everything.”

“Did you just say my baby is going to be a demon?” She draws back, humor lacing her face.

“Demon was a strong word. I do think she’s going to be able to get away with murder, though.”

“You’re probably right. Sutton is already too soft on Rand. Who knew he was such a pushover? Seriously, Rand will look at him a certain way and that big, strong man of mine turns to absolute mush.” She pauses. “Then again, he’s not the only one.” She gives me a sideways glance.

“Guilty as charged.” I hold a hand up. “I’d scale a fucking mountain in a mascot suit if that little boy asked me to.”

“Um, that seems oddly specific.” Her shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Just wait until it’s a little girl looking up at you. You’ll probably be worse than Sutton.”

“Probably,” I willingly admit.

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough. All I know is I’m ready to have this baby already. If my feet get any more swollen, I’m afraid they might pop.”

“Now that’s an image.” I snort.

“Mama!” Rand bursts back into the room, running full speed at his mother.

I lean forward and snag him around the waist before he can jump on her, turning him sideways before tickling his little belly. He squeals with laughter, kicking his little legs.

“Did you get your toys all cleaned up?” Aspen asks when I plop him upright on my lap.

“Yep.” He nods excitedly.

“I’m going to check. Are you sure you got them all?”

“Yep.” He continues to nod.

“Okay, here I go.” Aspen slowly pushes to a stand, the action taking more effort than it would if she weren’t eight months pregnant.

“Wait.” Rand scoots off my lap, running back out the way he just came in.

“That’s what I thought.” Aspen chuckles, looking out the large bay window at the front of the room.

When Aspen said she and my brother were buying a house in the suburbs, I thought she had lost her mind. Pen has never wanted to live anywhere but in the city. From the day we moved to D.C., she wanted to be in the thick of it all, but I see now that it really was the best move for their family. And honestly, she seems happy here and really, that’s all I could ask for.

Besides, once she completed her master’s degree and left the firm, there was nothing keeping her there. My brother still works in the city, having secured a permanent design position with one of the largest builders in the city. Aspen, however, decided she could do more good here and accepted a job as a child abuse counselor locally.

When she said she was going back to school so that she could help other kids who have suffered sexual and physical abuse, I wasn’t sure if it was the best idea. How could she heal from something that happened to her if she’s reminded of it every single day? But I can see now how wrong I was. By helping other victims of abuse, she’s been able to make peace with what happened to her and put a little good out into the world in the process.

She wasn’t given many chances in this life, but fuck if she didn’t take a grain of sand and build a fucking castle out of it.

“Finally.” She pulls the curtain aside, watching something outside.

“They here?”

“Just pulled in,” she confirms, moving toward the front door before quickly pulling it open.

Seconds later, my parents pile in, looking incredibly tan, which considering we grew up in Ohio, I’m not yet used to seeing.

Hugs and squeals fill the room as Rand runs in and the attention immediately shifts to him. But in the excitement and happiness of the moment, it’s not my parents or Rand that hold my attention, but rather my brother and how the second he steps inside, his eyes find his wife.

He moves toward her like she’s the other side of his magnet, the pull between them damn near palpable.

After setting my parents’ luggage next to the door, he gently pulls her into his arms and the two share a private moment, one I feel almost guilty for

watching. I can't help it. The way they love each other; it's something I can only hope to find one day.

Don't get me wrong. I'm still enjoying playing the field. I *am* still in my twenties, after all. Though only for a couple more months, as Pen likes to remind me. But I'm in no rush. If I've learned anything from these two, it's that things happen when you least expect it. For now, I'm open to it when it happens, and it will happen eventually, of that much, I'm sure.

"How are my girls?" Sutton strokes Aspen's cheek so gently it's as if he thinks she's made of glass.

"We're good. We missed you."

"Sorry, my mother insisted on stopping by the market so that she didn't show up empty-handed."

As if on cue, my mother stands, extending a bottle of wine to Aspen, forcing my brother to let her go, though he still keeps a hand on the small of her back.

"I know you can't drink it, but—"

"Doesn't mean everyone else can't enjoy it." Pen is quick to cut her off. "Speaking of, I hope everyone is hungry."

"Starving," my father grumbles, snagging Rand up into his arms before nuzzling his cheek. He likes to remind us all that the firstborn grandson was named after him, to which I'm quick to point out that he's not the only one. Rand Jonathan Remington Barnett is named after both of us. Technically, there's more of my name in there than his, but it does me no good to point out as much.

"We haven't eaten since this morning," my mother confirms, reaching out to touch Aspen's belly. "And how is my little Grace Summer doing in there?" Her eyes shine with pride.

Aspen being Aspen, said she couldn't name her firstborn son after my father and not name her firstborn daughter after my mother. She said it was only fitting because they are more parents to her than anyone else has ever been.

"Kicking the crap out of her mommy." Aspen smiles, letting my mother spend the next couple of minutes feeling around her belly, trying to feel a kick.

"All right, how about we take this to the dining room?" Sutton finally swoops in and saves his wife. "Pen's been cooking all day. We should enjoy it while it's fresh."

With that, everyone heads to the dining room while Sutton and Pen hang back for a brief moment. When Sutton's hand slides up her cheek, cupping her face, I take that as my cue to give them some privacy and quickly follow after my parents.

It isn't until a few hours later, after dinner and birthday cake have been eaten and presents have been opened, that things finally start to settle. Rand is asleep, having crashed after a sugar high that had him running circles around the house for nearly an hour. Mom and Dad are on the couch next to me, sipping on the wine they brought as they tell us all about their latest adventure in the Caribbean, while Sutton and Aspen are snuggled together in the oversized chair across from us.

It's moments like this, the quiet simple ones that I've come to appreciate the most. When I glance over at Pen, I find she's already looking at me, a smile touching her lips as our eyes meet.

I know she's thinking the same thing I am, how incredibly lucky we are to be here right now, in this moment, with the people we love the most.

She never thought she would have this, or that she deserved it, but seeing her now, it's easy to see that she was meant for this life. Too good for anything less.

Sometimes life has a funny way of leading us exactly where we're meant to be. Like the universe put Sutton in her path at the exact right time because it knew that was where she belonged. Just as it put me on her path because it knew I was going to need someone like her in my life.

She may not be my wife, but make no mistake, she *is* my other half. Always has been, always will be, and I know now that nothing will ever change that.

"I love you," I mouth, drowning in the appreciation I feel in this moment.

"I love you," she mouths back, leaning her head against her husband's shoulder with a satisfied sigh.

I don't know what the future has in store for us. I don't know where it will take us or what roadblocks it will throw in our path along the way, but I know one thing with complete certainty—we will always come out on the other side together.

And for me, that will always be enough.

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melissa Toppen is a USA Today Bestselling Author who specializes in Fantasy, New Adult and Contemporary Romance. She is a lover of books and enjoys nothing more than losing herself in a good novel. She has a soft spot for romance and all things fantasy, and focuses her writing in that direction; writing what she loves to read. You can find more information about Melissa and her books at melissatoppen.com

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