

Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1) by Danielle Hill

Chapter 21-25

Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1)

Twenty-One

Riley

"Where is he?" I asked, keeping my voice low, as Leon pulled the door open and stepped back to allow me to move inside.

The scene that greeted me halted me in my tracks. My head swivelled, wide eyes straying swiftly back to Leon, who dropped his gaze to his feet.

Voice sharp and accusing, I murmured, "You said you were taking care of him."

My heart felt like it grew heavier in my chest, as if it had somehow absorbed too much, like a sodden sponge I couldn't wring out.

"I tried, Riley. We all did. He wouldn't listen. That's why I called you."

My gaze drifted back to the darkened room at the end of the hallway. A sharp triangle of light spilled into the space, illuminating the prone form taking up most of the small couch. Reno sat, reclined with his chin to his chest and eyes closed. Even from here, I could see one of them had swollen shut. A multitude of dark shadows littered his face. Dried blood crusted on his pale shirt and his knuckles had split open.

"What happened?"

I already knew that he'd put the guy who'd stabbed Owen to death in the hospital last week. I also knew that no matter how many messages I'd left him that night, and every night before and after, he hadn't picked up the phone or called me back. He hadn't been back to his trailer, either. I'd stayed there alone for a few days. I must have sent him a hundred messages since then.

He hadn't called tonight. Leon had. I'd come because I always would. If Reno needed me, I would be there. But the possibility that he might not want me here, that he might tell me to leave, terrified me.

"It was like he wanted them to hit him, Ri." There was a distinct undertone of fear in Leon's voice. Fear for his friend, for the state of Reno's mind. "He just stood there, taking hit after hit, didn't even try to defend himself." He trailed off for a second, brows

lowering as if he was seeing it all again, before giving himself a visible shake and twisting back to face me.

“He said he wanted to fight. We tried to talk him out of it. Figured after the way things went down last time it wasn’t a good idea, I mean, fuck, we barely stopped him from killing that guy. But he was going with or without us, and we couldn’t let him go alone. We expected him to beat the crap out of someone. Seemed like that’s what he planned to do. He picked some random dude out of the crowd, head-butted him... and then just stood back while they jumped him.”

Leon’s hands landed on his thighs, disbelief still visible in his eyes when his gaze traveled back to his friend.

“He could have easily taken the first two, no fucking doubt. Didn’t even raise a fist, Ri. When we figured out what he was doing, we ran in. Two other guys jumped us, and it was fucking chaos. But... he didn’t fucking try, Riley. He didn’t try.”

Dread spiked through me and my feet crossed the distance before I’d noticed I was moving. My need to comfort Reno, to soothe the demons plaguing him, overrode my doubt and my fear. Falling to my knees between his spread thighs, I wrapped both hands around his calves and rested my cheek down lightly on his bent knee. I didn’t speak. The floorboards creaked under Leon’s feet as he walked back down the hall and then climbed the stairs, leaving us alone.

Leon’s mom had married a nice guy named Alec two years ago, and they’d moved out of the trailer that sat three down from mine and into this house a few months later. They’d kept the trailer. Leon sometimes used it. Reno probably could have gone there if he was finding it too hard to be home, but I suspected that he hadn’t wanted to be that close to me.

The thought gutted me, but still I held onto him. I couldn’t let him go. Not until he told me to.

Maybe not even then.

“I’m sorry,” his voice rasped, low and tortured, and laden with regret. His words seemed even heavier, shrouded in darkness. There was something about those two words that broke my heart. Something that spoke of finality.

Turning to press my face into the fabric of his sweatpants, I nodded.

“I know.”

I’d told him in a million ways, in the voice messages I’d left, in the text messages I’d sent, that he had nothing to be sorry for. I didn’t know whether he’d even listened to them or read them. I couldn’t get those words to come now.

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"I never meant for that to happen, not like that." His voice broke. I gripped him tighter, squeezing my eyes shut against his leg. "Never like that, Ri."

I nodded again, incapable of doing anything else. I knew that. With everything in me, I knew it. I also knew something had been stolen from us. Something neither of us knew how to get back. And not just our first time. It was more than that. Shifting, I rose to look at him. My trembling fingers lifted to trace the bruises on his face, carefully smoothing over the cut on his forehead and the lump above his left eye.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice nothing more than a heartbroken whisper.

He shrugged, glancing away.

"Ren, I—" I stopped, my eyes searching his face. "Do you... want me here?"

The vulnerability in my voice seemed to echo around the room, bouncing off every surface, as I waited for his response. Nothing came for so long I felt a lone tear slip from the corner of my eye and roll over the crest of my cheek. Looking down, I pulled my lip between my teeth and tried to figure out what I should do. I couldn't leave him. I didn't know how.

So, I sat on the floor, between his legs, dripping liquid pain onto the varnished floorboards until the watery dots collected to form a big puddle. Only then did Reno's hand take mine, his body shifting to accommodate me as he lifted me like I weighed nothing and positioned me across his lap, tucking me into his chest. His large palm covered the entire side of my face as he pressed his mouth down into my hair.

I'd once sworn I'd never let him in because I knew once I did, I wouldn't know how to be without him. He'd made me believe I'd never have to, and God knew, I'd tried to prepare myself for him to be wrong. I just hadn't imagined how deeply I could fall, o

r how quickly everything could fall apart.

When they came, Reno's words carried a fragility that left him wide open, showing me his biggest fear. "Will you leave me, Riley?"

Rising, I took his beautiful, battered face in both hands and forced his eyes to mine. With a certainty I hoped left him in no doubt, I shook my head vehemently and swore, "Never. I promise I will never leave you."

His nose brushed mine before he kissed me, soft and slow. I poured everything I had into him, every ounce of strength and love I had to give. I wanted him to have it. He had nothing else in this world, but he could have everything I was, if he'd only take it.

We stayed like that for hours, neither speaking, only the light sound of our breaths disturbing the still, silent air around us. Leon's mom popped her head in the door to check on us at some point, sadness tugging at her pretty features. Leon did the same, eyes tight, face drawn. With my cheek pressed against the solid surface of Reno's chest as it rose and fell steadily beneath me, my eyes slid closed despite my attempts to stay awake.

I felt his lips brush against my temple, and just before I drifted off, I heard him whisper, "You will, Riley."

I woke up alone.

Twenty-Two

Riley

The sound of the lock turning over made me spring from the bed, my bare feet slapping against the linoleum as I plodded quickly down the short hall.

"Reno?" Heavier footsteps halted abruptly. Disappointment surged inside of me and I muttered, "Oh, hey."

Leon gave me a half smile, understanding in his eyes. "You been staying here?"

I shrugged, wrapping my arms around myself.

"Not really. I just... stop by, open the drapes, stock the fridge, in case... you know." My voice drifted off, gaze dropping to the floor. Forcing a tight smile, I tilted my head toward the now covered window and mumbled, "I forgot to draw the curtains."

I didn't say that I sometimes came and lay on Reno's bed because I missed him, that his scent still lingered on his comforter. I didn't say any of that, because Leon knew Reno was avoiding me, and I didn't want to add humiliation to the pity radiating from his eyes. I glanced down again, chewing my lip, suddenly awkward around a guy I'd snuck behind the communal dumpster and swapped saliva with dozens of times.

"I was just heading home." I thumbed in the direction of my trailer, as if he didn't know where it was, as if it wasn't yards away from his.

He nodded, clearing his throat.

Words I hadn't planned on speaking tumbled from my lips. "He's not coming back, is he?" We both knew I didn't just mean to the trailer. He's not coming back to me.

Leon looked away.

"Leon? Just tell me what's going on. I need to know he's okay." I heard myself pleading, but I couldn't stop it. Let him pity me.

Meeting my eyes with a severe lack of enthusiasm, he sighed heavily. "He's okay, Riley. He's—" he broke off, his head slumping back as he ran a hand through his sandy hair, mussing it. "He's okay."

I struggled to curb the moisture gathering in my eyes, pressing my lips together while I inhaled through my nose.

I took a step toward the door.

Huffing a resigned breath, Leon raised his hands, stalling my movements. His blue eyes pleaded with mine for leniency, understanding. Only I didn't know what for. Yet.

"Look, Ri, he's going through a tough time. He's doing what he needs to do."

Lead settled in my chest, pressing my heart down into my stomach. My voice was harsh. "And what is it he needs to do?" He didn't answer with words, but guilt clung to his face like mold. "Why are you even here? Where is he?"

His hands landed on his hips, head shaking.

"I've got all night, Leon. You obviously came here for a reason? So, go ahead," I said, flinging my arm out behind me with dramatic flair. "Don't fucking mind me."

He exhaled a lengthy sigh, his mouth twisting into a grimace. "It doesn't matter. I didn't know you'd be here, Ri."

"What did you come here for, Leon?" I asked again, my voice quiet and tightly controlled, the eerie calm that came before a storm.

"Nothing. Look, I gotta get back."

He went for the door. I pre-empted him, springing forward and blocking his path.

"Just fucking tell me! I haven't heard from or seen him for almost two goddamn weeks. He's acting like I don't exist, and I don't even know why! I don't know what I've done wrong! What the hell could you tell me that could hurt more than that?" My voice escalated, desperation governing my emotions and seeping into my words.

He grabbed my flailing wrists, holding them still. "He's at a party, okay? Some chicks we met down at the fight scene told us about a party. He's... there."

My brows sunk low over my eyes. "And why aren't you there? With him? Where is it... this party?"

"He's not thinking straight right now, Ri, but I'm sober. One hundred percent sober, haven't touched a drop. I'm looking out for him. I left him with Mack and the guys while I—" he broke off.

"Leon," I growled.

"Fine! For fuck's sake, Ri!"

That sinking sensation in my stomach turned into a whirlpool, a giant vortex sucking my insides out of me. I swallowed, throat bone dry, my voice barely fighting through the ball of grief that had settled in my throat. I whispered, "Just tell me."

"I came to grab condoms."

"Condoms?" I blurted, frowning.

"Yeah, these chicks are all over us. None of us had any. Didn't exactly go out with the intention of... well, anyway... wouldn't trust any of those Richmond hoes. Fuck knows where they've been. This was the nearest place I could think to get some. I didn't know you'd be here."

Heart pounding and unable to meet his eyes, I asked quietly, "Does Reno need them?"

He hesitated. It was all the answer I needed. Vomit worked its way up my throat and I gagged, heading blindly in the direction of the bathroom that seemed to take another piece of my heart every time I stumbled through the door. If I kept going like this, I'd walk away from this place completely empty.

Leon trudged behind me, grabbing my hair as I heaved over the toilet bowl.

"Shit, Ri. I didn't..." His hand landed on my back, rubbing softly. "Shit."

Shit. That was one word for it.

My boyfriend, who hadn't confirmed if he still was that but had said he loved me once upon a time, was probably waiting for his best friend to bring him condoms so he could fuck a random girl he'd picked up a few hours ago.

"Ri, I know how that sounded, but it's not as bad as you're thinking," Leon said.

I raised my brows, shooting him the best sardonic glare I could muster.

He sank down beside me, scrubbing his hands over his face. "The fuck did I say condoms for?"

"Because it's the truth," I muttered, wearily.

He twisted his head. "I'm a fucking idiot," he said, berating himself.

"Don't feel bad for telling me the truth, Le. It's better I know now, right? It would have been nice if he'd ended things with me first, but if that's what he wants—"

"That's not what he wants," he interjected, not a hint of doubt in his voice.

"What?" I asked, head furrowing as I shifted to look at him.

He shrugged. "He's not into it, Riley. He's going through the motions."

I rubbed my fingers over my forehead, trying to make sense of what he was telling me. "I don't know what to say. I think... I think that makes it worse."

"Nah, it doesn't." Assured blue eyes snagged mine, holding me there. "You know, I always knew how he felt about you. Long before he ever told me, I knew. And when he finally did tell me, I asked him whether you were worth our friendship. He told me I wouldn't like his answer. Not once in fifteen years had we fought over a chick, but he fought for you, Ri."

My lids shuttered against the tide of emotion welling inside of me. A tight knot of pain formed in my gut. I let my head fall back and ran my fingernails through the loose strands of hair, resisting the urge to tug.

"Doesn't matter now, does it?"

His firm hand caught mine, gripping onto it before giving my fingers a gentle squeeze. "He's crazy about you, Ri. Always has been. He hasn't been able to keep his eyes off you since he hit puberty. I used to see the way he looked at you and wonder why the fuck he held back. I mean, I wasn't complaining, but I couldn't figure him out. He'd bring

you up in conversation, ask about you, where you were. Half the time I don't think he even realized he was doing it."

Warmth bloomed in my chest, and my throat worked overtime to voice my thoughts. "But he's with someone else tonight."

Leon lowered his gaze, dropping his chin to rest on his bent knees. "Whatever stopped him from making his move back then, Ri, didn't change the way he felt about you. My point is, he still looks at you the same way, still talks about you, asks about you, without knowing it. You're in here." He raised t

wo fingers and tapped them against his temple. Then he lowered them, spreading his hand out over his heart and bringing his eyes back to mine before adding softly, "And here. You always have been."

My breath caught, warm moisture pricking my lids as my heart thundered behind my ribs. I couldn't form words.

Using his palms, Leon pushed himself to his feet and stood, towering over me. His steady stare bore into mine.

"I shouldn't have stood between you two. I acted like an asshole last year. I never apologized for that."

I offered him a weak smile, my brain struggling to function. "Don't worry about it."

He thrust his arm out, offering his hand. Clutching it, I let him haul me up from the floor. He chucked my chin with his thumb and forefinger before mussing my hair a little.

"I love you, Ri. But not the way he does. And I think that might be because you never looked at me the way you look at him."

My head fell forward, water tracking from my eyes. "I want to believe you, but he's pushing me away."

Leon sighed heavily. "He lost his brother and his dad a few weeks ago. They were the only family he had left. He let a bunch of guys kick the shit out of him just so he wouldn't have to think about it or feel any of it. If you ask me, he's doing the same thing right now. He's scared because he feels too much. So, he's trying to convince himself he doesn't. Because then he won't have to lose you, too."

I frowned up at him. "But I'm right here. Waiting for him."

I'd hounded him with phone calls I knew he wouldn't answer. Bombarded him with messages I knew he wouldn't reply to. Stayed at his place, knowing he wouldn't be coming back. I'd only physically gone to him twice since the funeral. I'd convinced myself it was better to wait for him to come to me because I didn't want to push him, but really it was because I had needed that reassurance, that guarantee that I wouldn't face his rejection. I'd been thinking about my needs. How hadn't it occurred to me that he might have needed that from me? That he might have needed me to prove that I'd be there, not just say the words. The person who'd lost almost everyone that mattered had all but begged me to be the one who stayed. The times I'd gone to him, he'd needed me. He'd shown it in different ways, but he'd still shown it. He had needed me. Not some random hook-up who meant nothing to him. Me. And I'd stayed away, too afraid to hear him say he didn't want me.

The thought of him with someone else made my stomach sick, but I'd left him alone in his grief. Too scared to fight for him, for us. And now I was in pain anyway, my heart breaking without him. We were a little lost, but I knew how I felt about him, and a few weeks ago he'd kissed me and told me he loved me with the entire school as a witness.

That hadn't died. It couldn't have. I wouldn't let it.

Reno was worth it. We were worth it.

My head snapped up. "Where is he, Leon?"

If I didn't know better, I'd say there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes, but he narrowed them quickly and cleared his throat. "I'm not bringing you there, Ri. It's a fucking cesspool. He'd kill me. Leave it for tonight. I'll get him home. Come see him tomorrow."

"Leon," I grated.

"No fucking way, Ri, not doing it." His brows drew down. "Don't fucking look at me like that. You wouldn't want to go there. It's seedy as fuck."

My lips parted to argue when a set of headlights lit up the window, drawing both of our heads around. My mom's car. I flattened my mouth and dipped my head once in agreement.

"You okay?" Leon asked, bending low to reach my eyes.

I hiked one shoulder, pulling my lips up at one side.

His hands rubbed over my arms and he dropped a quick kiss to the top of my head. "I gotta get out of here, yeah?"

I let him go, watching from the open doorway until his tail lights faded from sight. Then I hauled ass over to the trailer three down and threw the door open.

My mom jumped, almost toppling over the heels she was busy taking off.

“Mom,” I barked as she gaped at me, “I need your car.”

Her brows came together. “Uhm, okay... keys are on the hook?”

There was a question in her voice. One I didn’t have time to answer.

Twenty-Four

Riley

“Good, you’re awake—”

“Are you dying?” a voice saturated with sleep asked.

“What? No.” I scrunched my face, my eyes trained intently on the road ahead of me.

“Is anyone dying?”

“No! I nee—”

“Did you get arrested and need bail money?”

“Jesus, no! Everyone’s good. Nobody’s incarcerated. What the hell is wrong with you? I’m call—”

Shit! I swung it back sharply. So, I had my license, but I probably shouldn’t honestly. I likely wouldn’t crash—providing I kept my eyes on the road. I drove like Miss Daisy rode shotgun.

“I’m driving to your place. I’ll be out front in about five minutes.” My eyes shifted to the speedometer. “Uh, make that ten. Maybe fifteen.”

“You’re speaking gibberish to me. It’s way too late, or early, for this crazy behaviour. Wait, you’re driving?”

Now I had her attention.

"Yep," I proclaimed proudly, as a squirrel overtook me. Oh well. She didn't need to know that. I applied a tiny bit more pressure to the gas. The squirrel jerked, then disappeared into the tree line. Well, that's what you get for being a damned show off.

"Riley!!" Liss screeched for my attention, not for the first time by the sounds of it.

"Yes?" I asked, innocently.

"Why are you driving? More importantly, why are you driving here? And why am I being woken up at the ass crack of dawn?"

"Oh, calm down. It's only one a.m., Grandma, and I'm coming to pick you up because we have a party to go to."

Silence. Rustling. More silence. "Did you snap? Did you go crazy? Lose your marbles? That it?"

"Nope. Now, get up and get dressed. I'm getting the hang of this thing. I might be there in seven."

"Seriously, I was sleeping like three minutes ago. Snoring, drool, dreams, the works. I can't go to a party, you freakin' lunatic. I look like an extra from The Walking Dead! Why would I go to a party?"

When I thought about why, my heart sank a little. Yeah, I had a newfound determination. And yes, I knew what I wanted now, that it was worth fighting through my fear, and the defenses Reno had erected. That didn't mean the thought of what I might find there, what I might walk into, didn't terrify me. But he was mine, and I would damn well convince him I wasn't going anywhere.

"It's in Richmond East," I told Liss quietly, my voice heavy and sober, "with some fight scene crowd. Reno's there. With a girl."

She went quiet for a few drawn out seconds. "Give me five minutes."

A breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding eased out of me. My lips formed a flat line of relief.

"You've got six," I

said, and hung up. Then looked at the speedometer and grimaced. "... teen."

I ignored the look of trepidation Liss wore as she lowered herself into the seat and secured the belt snugly around her waist. Neither of us said anything for the first few minutes as I drove the short distance out of town, my mind preoccupied with getting us to our destination without incident. When my eyes flickered briefly to Liss, it didn't

surprise me to see she harbored similar concerns. It would have been hard not to notice her white-knuckled grip on the handle, or the stiff way she held her frame, like her very life was in jeopardy.

Side eyeing her, I muttered, "You know, you could probably run faster than I'm driving. Plus, the roads are empty, like-wide-open-haven't-seen-another-vehicle-the-entire-time-I've-been-driving empty. So, why the hell are you acting as if you're about to croak?"

Without glancing my way, thumb nail wedged firmly between her front teeth, she said, "Trees, lots of trees. And street lamps. You could easily wrap this bad boy around one of those. Oh, and just FYI, we drive on the right side of the road in America. You know, in case you decided you might want to actually pick one lane and stick with it at any point during this delightful middle of the night road trip."

Shooting a sharp glance in her direction, I grumbled, "I have remained within my lane at all times, thank you."

She turned her head a fraction and arched a brow. Seeing an opportunity, I quickly twisted my face in horror and screeched, "Oh my God!" while swinging the car sharply to the left.

Liss' face morphed into an expression of terror as she screamed, head swivelling back to front so quickly I worried she'd give herself whiplash. Righting the car smoothly, I looked through the window, a satisfied smirk playing over my lips.

Panting, one hand clutching her neck as if searching for a string of pearls, the other pushing into her chest like she was trying to force her heart back behind her rib cage, she turned on me. "You evil... I almost died there. I hope you know that!"

Head pivoting to look at her, I hitched a shoulder, my face a picture of innocence. "Sorry, thought I saw a squirrel."

"I don't know. He's been avoiding me. Won't answer my calls or texts. He hasn't been home, hasn't tried to see me. I just... I don't know. I don't know if we're over, if we're not, you know. He hasn't said. But I'd say he's desperately trying to forget everything right now, including me."

"And that's what he's doing tonight? Forgetting about you?"

The tiny sting intensified, gaining momentum and spreading through me, twisting my insides and squeezing my chest. My hands clenched around the wheel. I couldn't answer her, couldn't trust myself to speak.

Still chewing on her thumbnail, face contemplative, her concerned gaze swept over me as I eased the car to the side of the road and shifted into park.

"He's hooking up with some girl in there?"

Tears stung the backs of my eyes. I blinked, squaring my shoulders. I could see a run-down house up ahead. Cars lined the street out front, music blared from the open windows, people staggered around in the yard, laughing and smoking and clutching plastic cups. Leon wouldn't tell me where they were. Mack had told Facebook, though.

"I don't know," I said quietly, knowing it was a lie. "Maybe."

Her hand squeezed my shoulder, resting there as she spoke.

"He loves you. Anyone with eyes in their head can see that. He just can't see past his own pain." Clear blue eyes held mine. "But are you sure you want to go in there? Because you won't be able to forget whatever you see."

Sucking in a sharp breath, I whispered, "I have to go in."

Her eyes flushed with sympathy and her fingers gripped mine. "I know. I had to try."

Narrowed gaze shifting to scan the neighbourhood slowly, she cocked her head and a low whistle sounded from her lips. "Not many people I'd take a night-time stroll through the dark side of Richmond for."

"Yep," I breathed, my eyes copying hers.

We exited the car and began making our way down the uneven sidewalk. Trash and dull shards of glass littered the ground. Broken toys scattered the street. A kids' trike lay at the side of the road missing all but one wheel. Claremont was fairly neutral ground. No major discrepancies in wealth. Some were better off financially than others, lived in bigger, nicer houses and had newer cars. The trailer park was as bad as it got, but even then, it was a decent place and well-managed, unlike many others.

Richmond, though, was a tale of two towns. Richmond West, about a twenty-minute drive from Claremont, was super affluent; gated homes with sculpted landscaping and multiple expensive cars lining the drives. But this side, the East side, less than a ten-minute drive away, was a collection of run-down dilapidated shacks, more boarded windows than you could count, and yards overflowing with all manner of crap, surrounded by chain link fencing that made it look like one giant prison.

A rough scraping noise sounded just before a massive black dog burst forward through a jagged hole in the metal fence, lunging for us with its snout drawn back and teeth bared as it barked and snarled. We both screamed at the top of our lungs, immediately jumping back and clutching onto each other, fumbling to run until we noticed the leash

holding the beast back. It twisted and pounded its paws against the sidewalk, half of its huge black body inside the yard, the other out.

Bending forward, I planted both palms on the tops of my thighs and inhaled heavily. Liss rested a hand on my back, eyes lasered on the demonic mutt wrestling with the chain that prevented it mauling us to death.

“Jesus-effing-Christ,” I wheezed, shooting a quick glance over my shoulder. “What the hell kind of dog is that?”

“A scary ass motherfucker, that’s what! Look at the thing! It’s legit eyeing me up like it wants to rip my pretty head from my body and snack on it!” She flipped it off, before dragging me up and brushing herself off, glancing warily around before muttering, “Nearly lost my fucking cool there, didn’t I?”

I shot her a sardonic look, eyebrow hiking. “Nearly?”

She bumped me with her shoulder and pinched my arm. “Um, ouch!”

“Do not test me, Riley Mason. I’ve almost died twice tonight already, and that’s before we head into Gangster’s Paradise.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you die,” I murmured, not entirely sure I could follow up on my promise as we neared the metal gate hanging on by one hinge. Skirting around it, we were met immediately with a combination of hostility and interest. Sounded about right.

A heavy arm landed around my shoulders before I’d walked three steps inside the yard.

“Damn, baby, you are fucking fine.”

Curbing my eye roll, I resisted shoving him off and causing a scene. I wanted access and I needed someone to escort me inside without question. Might as well be this guy, even if the stench of alcohol and weed rolling off him was overpowering. Glancing back at Liss, I could see she had her own admirer. Lucky us.

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Catching her eye, I mouthed okay? She tipped her chin up and made a face before sticking a thumb up sarcastically and calling out, “Never better.” Then she turned her charm on the guy draped all over her. He had no idea what was about to hit him.

Pasting on a coy smile, I glanced up at the asshole who hadn't heard of deodorant, or cologne, or anything that smelled nice, and fluttered my lashes.

"Hey, I need a drink."

His eyes gleamed as he led me toward the house. He thought he was in. God, what type of people frequented these parties that this kid thought he'd get lucky with some girl who'd just walked through the door thirty seconds ago? My eyes widened at the sight of a slim blonde sandwiched between two guys, each with one hand under her tight, red skirt and the other kneading her exposed breasts. Well, that answered my question. Pulling my eyes away, I looked back to make sure Liss was following. A small group of girls stood just inside the gate, the same ones who'd tracked our entrance with down-turned lips and cold, narrowed eyes. They tracked our exit the same way.

Distracted by the heavy thump of the bass, the suffocating mass of bodies crowding the small space, and the cloud of smoke obscuring everything around me, I lost sight of Liss as my new friend pulled me along the hall and into a tiny kitchen littered with yet more bodies, more smoke and enough alcohol to supply a small country for a year. I needed to get eyes on Liss. She could handle herself okay in a normal situation, but I wasn't about to drag her to this crack den in the ass end of Richmond, then leave her to get molested or attacked. Trying to escape this guy was proving difficult, though. His grip on my arm tightened before he slammed it down around my shoulders again, leaning the bulk of his considerable weight on me.

Not particularly giving any fucks if I caused a scene now that he'd escorted me inside, I bent my elbow, brought it up, then rammed it back into BO's ribs as I smashed my heel down on his foot. He grunted, doubling over a bit, but not enough to let go of me. In fact, his face twisted, dropping right in front of mine before he planted his forearm under my neck and pushed me back, knocking people out of the way. Drinks swilled, spilling sticky liquid onto my bare legs.

Goddamn.

He pushed until my back met the solid surface of the wall and then thrust his arm up hard, crushing it into the underside of my jaw. Staring him down, I ground my teeth together and bit out, "I need to find my friend."

Leering eyes roved my face before the tip of his tongue darted out, stroking over his cracked bot

tom lip. Slowly, he swung his head from side to side.

"Nah, girl. You need to stay right here and suck my di—"

His face disappeared before he could finish telling me to blow him. I barely caught sight of his body hurtling through the air before it slammed against the counter, sending bottles crashing to the ground. Some people scattered, others lunged forward, as shouts erupted and the guy dropped to the deck, sprawled out and groaning.

I swallowed, eyes wide, as the person I'd come here for stalked over to the asshole writhing on the floor. Reno looked a breath away from tearing him limb from limb. I couldn't drag my eyes away as he grabbed a fistful of the guy's hair and started swinging.

Twenty-Five

Reno

My bloodied hands framed Riley's flushed cheeks as I dipped low. Bringing our faces level, my sweeping gaze assessed every inch of her. I couldn't press pause on the image of that fucker's arm across her neck. A low growl rumbled in my throat, fury coursing through me like acid. Tucking my chin into my chest, I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to work through the rage. I wanted him dead. For daring to lay a finger on her, I wanted to fucking end him. But Riley was here. In the fucking slums of Richmond, at a party full of addicts and fighters. I needed her out of here more than I wanted to stay and pound that guy's face to dust.

Shaking it off, I brought my eyes back to her face and smoothed my fingers over her cheekbones, frowning at the sight of smeared blood coating her skin from my touch.

"We gotta fucking split, dude," Leon yelled behind me. "Move your ass, Lissa!"

Gripping Riley's hand in mine, I tugged her behind me, shifting my grip to her wrist when it kept slipping in my hold.

Blood. Why was there always blood between us these days? I shook my head as we ducked out of the door, a chorus of shouts ringing out behind us.

My heart was still pounding, beating like a mother-fucking train. It had been since Liss had appeared out of thin air, shouting about some guy hauling Riley off. I'd been two seconds from passing out, ass planted on a battered sofa that had more of its foam scattered around the room than inside the fucker. Liss' words had hit me like a bucket of ice water.

Scrubbing a hand over my face as we raced down the sidewalk, I slanted a glance down at Riley, who still hadn't said a word to me. Snaking an arm around her waist, I increased my pace, moving us down the sidewalk. I could hold my own, so could the guys. Probably couldn't hold fifty of them between us.

Stopping outside of Leon's truck, I gripped the handle and flung it open, tossing Riley inside. She dropped onto the seat without argument, shifting along before stilling suddenly, her head snapping up. "My mom's car! I came in my mom's car. I can't leave it!"

Looking down at her, I exhaled roughly, pinching the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger as I shot a glance behind us. I tapped my fingers against the door impatiently, thinking, debating the probability of being able to drive Riley's car back without totalling it—given the bottle of whiskey I'd downed tonight, it seemed low.

Puffing out a breath, I thrust out a palm. "Keys."

Riley reached under her butt and fished around in her pocket before depositing a bunch of keys in my hand.

"Here, man," Mack called, arm raised. "I got it."

Tossing him the keys, I waited until he and Danny rounded the side of Riley's car, then I hopped into Le's truck and slammed the door closed. Liss sat perched on her knees in the passenger seat, facing the back of the car, her eyes trained on Riley's bent head. Leon thrust the car into drive and sped off down the street.

"You okay, babe?" Liss asked Riley, leaning forward to tap her outstretched fingers along Riley's bent knee.

Riley's head jerked up. "What? Oh, um, yeah, I'm good." She nodded, lips flattening before she twisted to face the window. Liss patted her knee once more before spinning around in her seat, then flying halfway across the center console when Le rounded a corner too sharply.

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"Fuck's sake, Leon!" she screeched, scowling at him, her lip curling up as she righted herself. "I almost landed in your fucking lap! I've got a frickin skirt on here... I could have caught something! I mean, Christ, I'd want to be wearing full PPE before I came into contact with that nasty thing. Jesus!" She gave an exaggerated shudder.

I rolled my eyes back, rocking the back of my head against the fabric of the seat cushion.

"Fuck you, Alissa!"

Her frown deepened. He'd used her full name to piss her off. Worked every time.

"I wouldn't fuck you with someone else's vagina, pretty boy."

"Pretty boy? You know, you could put that smart mouth of yours to better use by wrapping it around my dick."

"Yeah, Leon, I'll suck your dick," she mocked, miming sucking dick with her hand and mouth, "just as soon as you've dipped it in bleach."

"Fucking brutal," Leon said, pushing a hand through his hair.

"You forget I know where that's been." She fake gagged.

"Hey! I always wrap it before I tap it."

"Aw look at you, putting that last little brain cell in your head to good use. Gotta say I'm surprised." Leon grinned wide. "And grateful... nobody needs that gene pool expanded," she deadpanned.

The smile dropped off his face.

Liss turned to the front, her face stoic. "Still wouldn't fuck you with my blow-up doll."

Le full on scowled now, shaking his head and muttering under his breath as he turned away from her. Seemingly in defeat.

Yeah, give up, man, you ain't gonna win this one.

Slumping back in the seat, I let my head fall to the side. Riley's cheek rested against the window, lids closed.

"Drop me at my place, Le," I said. Her body tensed for a split second at my words, fingers twitching in her lap. Voice low to avoid being overheard, I murmured, "You okay?"

Her head dipped once in a curt nod, her fingernails tracing circle patterns on her thigh as she stared out the window. Every so often a brief flash of light cut into the car, illuminating the soft planes and angles of her face, contrasting with her troubled expression, before fading out again as we crossed over into Claremont.

"You guys good?" Leon asked uncertainly, his gaze flicking between the two of us as we got out of the car at the entrance to the trailer park. Clearly at a loss of what the fuck to do with us.

Riley stuck up a thumb, not looking at him.

I stood, my hands jammed in my pockets, watching her.

"We're good, Le."

Riley walked off toward my trailer. I followed.

"Can I get you something?" I asked, stepping aside to let her go on ahead of me, flipping the switch by the kitchen. "If I have anything," I tacked on.

"You do," she mumbled.

I nodded. My eyes lifted to take a slow sweep of the place I'd called home for the past fifteen years. It didn't feel that way now. I coughed, gaze swinging back to Riley, and forced all the crap that wanted to rise to the surface back down.

"You've been coming by?"

She leaned back against the counter and sighed. "Yeah."

"You didn't need to do that."

She shrugged, crossing slim arms over her chest. "I wanted to."

Holding her arms out, she held my eyes; hers flashed defiantly. "I wanted it to be you."

"Li

ke that?" I demanded, voice rising as I jabbed a finger in the direction of my bedroom door. "That's what you wanted?"

"Does it matter how it happened?"

"Fuck yes, it does!" I roared. "I don't even fucking remember it, Riley!"

I saw her flinch, watched those big green eyes well. She looked away, clearing her throat. "And what about tonight? Do you remember that?"

I didn't respond.

Her throat worked, hard eyes swinging back to me. "Did you have sex with someone tonight?"

"No, I didn't." I'd thought about it. Couldn't fucking do it, though.

"Kiss someone?"

"No." My eyes cut sharply to hers before I could stop them, the emphatic denial breaking through my lips without hesitation. Probably should have lied, made her hate me. But I couldn't let her think I'd put my lips on some random chick. That was for her, and her only. Even if everything was fucked up beyond repair.

Her chin wobbled slightly as she nodded, her shoulders rising with her extended inhalation.

"But you did something?"

Pushing further into the room, my silence answer enough, I strode past her and jerked the refrigerator door open. My chest constricted at the sight of the groceries lined neatly on the glass shelves. She'd shopped, filled the fridge, cleaned the place. For me. My fingers squeezed around the door.

I'd let some chick hang all over me, let her hands roam my chest and lips trail my neck. I'd sat there like a fucking mannequin as she'd climbed up and straddled me, her body grinding into mine. I hadn't touched her, but I hadn't stopped her either. Leon had looked seconds away from beating my ass the entire time. Pity had stopped him. He hadn't said it. Hadn't needed to. I recognized the look by now. And you didn't punch a guy who was grieving, who's entire fucking family just fell off the face of the earth.

I wished he had. I'd fucking wanted him to. Hitting the guy who'd murdered O hadn't even come close to providing the relief I'd been hoping for. Taking a hit, though? That gave me a minute's fucking peace from the shit storm that was my mind. Letting some girl dry hump me to take my brain off Riley? It did the exact opposite. All I could goddamn think about was Riley. And when this chick had gone for my belt, I'd bolted. Moved her off and walked away.

"Why?" Riley whispered.

I stood still, staring unseeing into the fridge. "Because this isn't going to work."

Silent seconds ticked by. "Don't I get a say?"

Slipping the door closed, I pivoted and leaned back against it, resolute. "No."

Her lips pursed in frustration and her small hands flattened on the counter behind her as she straightened. "You said you loved me. A few weeks ago. You said those words. Was that just bullshit?"

Breath escaped my lips in a harsh puff. "That feels like a different fucking lifetime, Riley."

Her head tilted as she observed me, her fingertips curling around the counter. "And you don't feel that way anymore?"

I met her gaze, rising off the fridge and rocking on the balls of my feet, planting my hands low on my hips. "I'm not the same guy anymore."

"That's not what I asked."

Shaking my head, I dragged air in through my nose. "What do you want me to say?"

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She took a step away from the counter, and then another, moving toward me until only inches separated us. "I want you to say it."

Voice rough as gravel, I asked a question I already knew the answer to. "What?"

I knew what she wanted from me. She wanted words I couldn't fucking bring myself to say. Her closeness was goddamn intoxicating, messing with my head, with my reasoning and resolve. Making me question what the fuck I was doing.

Eyes blazing, she opened her lips. "I want to hear you say you don't love me anymore."

Fuck. My chest heaved as I looked down at her. Feelings and emotions battered me like a hurricane against storm shutters.

"Everything ends, Riley. Sooner or later. Might as well get it over with."

"Eventually," she agreed, running the tip of her tongue along her top lip, just to drive me to the fucking brink of my control it seemed. "But what about the middle part? You miss out on so much if you cut right to the end. I want the middle, Maddox. We deserve that."

My lungs faltered at the unfamiliar sound of my given name on her lips. Fuck, I liked it. Too much.

"I already know how it ends. Everything in between is me waiting for the day you leave me."

"Where am I going?" She breathed softly, pinkie finger reaching out to snag mine, interlacing them together. I swallowed roughly, that small touch sparking like a current. I withdrew my hand, severing the link.

"Anywhere. Nowhere. Doesn't matter. You. Will. Leave."

The affection in her gaze, in the light touch of her skin to mine, was unwavering and uncompromising. But I couldn't look at it, didn't want it. I wanted nothing else to lose. Stepping back, I broke the connection between us, my eyes hard, unyielding.

"I'm saving us both a fuck load of heartache, Riley. You'll thank me one day."

A light smirk touched her lips. The sight of it was so unexpected, I didn't know how to react.

"You can't say it, can you?"

Realization sent my head downward, hanging heavily from my shoulders. I don't fucking love you. They were just words. I couldn't say them. Not now, maybe never. But it changed nothing. Love was a weakness. One I didn't want.

She drifted backward toward the door, still facing me as her hand closed around the handle.

"I realized something tonight. We're both scared. Scared to give someone else the power to hurt us. But it's too late for me. I'm already there. I meant it when I told you I loved you. I can't just give up on that. Someone told me tonight that you might still feel the same way." Her throat bobbed delicately as she swallowed. "If that's not true anymore, then okay, I'll walk away. But you need to convince me first. So, until you say it... I'm not giving up on you. One day, you will thank me for that." She spoke surely, her voice and expression determined.

Her words rattled me, shook the cages of my resolve.

"You'll end up getting hurt, Riley," I warned gruffly, but with far less conviction than I'd intended.

Without so much as a batted eyelash, she declared, "I'll survive."

Then she whirled around and disappeared through the doorway, leaving my head in chaos and my heart in fucking ruins.