

Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1) by Danielle Hill

Chapter 26-30

Twenty-Six

Riley

"What the...?" I sputtered as Liss backed into me, her heel smashing down on my toe. She hastily grasped my hand and led me away from the cafeteria doors.

"You know what?" she practically yelled, eyes extra wide. "We should eat somewhere else. We're allowed off campus for lunch senior year. Seems a shame we haven't exercised that right."

My face twisted, bewildered. "Um, okay, that didn't come out of left field or anything. But yeah, super idea, Liss. How about we do that tomorrow when I'm not effing starving to death and conveniently situated right outside the cafeteria?"

Patting her shoulder, I swerved around her. She muttered what sounded like a Jesus under her breath, before trailing after me. I felt her mouth close to my ear as I pushed through the doors and my eyes landed on a sight I had neither wanted nor expected to see, ever again.

Liss spoke quickly. "He's back. Don't lose your shit."

I felt the bite of pain before I realized I'd clenched my fists so tight the nails were cutting into my skin.

"Riley, don't react, we know what he's doing," Liss cautioned.

My breath came in sharp, angry pants, teeth crunching against each other. I inhaled through flared nostrils, trying to calm myself. But I'd taken four strides before I knew what I was doing, stopping in front of the boy who seemed determined to prove something to himself—or me, or both of us—and the girl whose trashy ass spilled out of his lap. The furious beat of my heart must have been clear for everyone in a ten-foot radius to hear.

"I need a word."

"No," he clipped, without looking up.

“Now.”

With infuriatingly slow and deliberate movements, he tipped his chin. Hard, obstinate eyes met mine. “As you can see, I’m busy.”

I could almost smell the satisfaction seeping from Raya's pores like a foul odor. Gaze fixed sharply on Reno, I cocked my head. “Yeah, looks it.”

I allowed my eyes to trail to Raya, who was struggling to contain her glee, her brown eyes sparkling with delight.

“Had some work done on your lips, Raya?” I asked, injecting a dose of civility into my tone that had her eyes narrowing in suspicion for a second, before her features swiftly settled back into the sneer she reserved, just for me. “Channelling Kylie Jenner, these days, huh?”

I heard Liss’ scoff of disagreement. Raya eyed me without speaking, considering the words that sounded like a compliment to her ears, but knowing not to trust them. She shouldn’t.

“They look like they’d be perfect for kissing,” I mused, tapping a finger against my chin as my head slid back toward Reno, trapping him in my stare. “I know how much you two love putting on a show. How about giving the lady a kiss, Ren?”

I stood in front of him, arms crossed over my chest, defiance stamped all over my face. My eyes dared him to do it. But the show of bravado was just that—a show.

Blind panic rushed me, climbing up my throat and gripping my chest with bony hands. I didn’t know what I’d do if he called my bluff. And I had no guarantee he wouldn’t... except for his reaction when I’d asked him if he’d kissed another girl at that party in Richmond. He’d more than denied it, as if the idea offended him. To this day, he’d still kissed no one but me. I may well be acting like a damn crazy person, and every one of my trembling limbs suggested that was the case, but that knowledge was enough to convince me to stand my ground. He wanted to prove a point. Well, I had something to prove, too. To myself, but more importantly, to him.

Reno’s face turned to stone in front of my eyes, his skin blanching beneath his natural tan. The sight bolstered my confidence. He wouldn’t do it. I felt some of the tension drain from me; my shoulders

relaxed, and my breaths eased.

Perched on Reno’s thigh, Raya swivelled to look at his face. Her expression faltered when she found his attention fixed firmly on me. She frowned, uncertain, her ire-filled

gaze flitting between me and Reno. Forcing a high-pitched laugh, she twisted until her back pressed to his chest and snapped her fingers in front of my face. "Bitch, we're not here for your entertainment. Move on."

I slid my gaze to hers and flashed her a smirk. Yeah, she knew he wasn't putting his lips on hers. And she knew I knew it. The hand clutching Reno's knee tightened. Blind fury flashed in her eyes, almost palpable.

"Oh, really? I've seen you suck a dick under this very table for everyone's entertainment, but kissing you have a problem with?" Slanting a brow up, I levelled her with a look of skepticism. "I guess some lips are only good for wrapping around a piece of meat, huh?"

Her jaw clenched, cheekbones flushing with spots of pink as she shifted uncomfortably, her eyes darting surreptitiously around the table.

"Not sure if you remember it, but Reno and I locked lips right. Over. There." I motioned to the center of the room, the exact spot we were standing when Reno told me he loved me. I didn't miss the pulsing in Reno's jaw, or the muscles in his forearm pulling taut as he clenched and unclenched his hand into a tight ball by his side. When I turned back, those full lips of his had settled into a grim line, and his stare burned through me.

"What's the problem, Ren? Don't tell me you've gone all shy on us?"

Brown eyes spitting fire, he jerked up from his seat, tipping Raya out of his lap so abruptly she dropped to a knee on the ground before quickly righting herself. He didn't spare her a glance as he clamped a hand around my wrist and carted me from the room.

My back collided with the solid surface of the nearest wall the instant we'd cleared the cafeteria doors. Fury colored his gaze black.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he grated, hot breath fanning my lips as he leaned in.

Fluttering my lashes up at him, I widened my eyes. "What? You didn't want to kiss her?"

His chin lifted, the muscle in his jaw ticking furiously. "Don't fuck with me, Riley."

"Want me to fuck you instead?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

Some of his anger dissipated, swiftly replaced by another kind of heat. His attention dropped to my lips. I swept the tip of my tongue over them, watching as the rhythm of his breathing changed.

His voice low and throaty, he said, "Don't start a game you won't win, Ri."

I shrugged, not letting him look away. "Ready to say it yet?"

He caught the challenge in my tone. His body stiffened at my words. Pushing him could go one way or the other, but at this point, I'd take either of those options over his blatant indifference, or avoidance, or watching him get goddamn lap dances from Queen Bee-yatch.

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Thrusting away from me, he positioned his hands on his hips and levelled me with a pointed look. "You think you're changing anything by doing this?"

"Why not just kiss her? You're using her to make a point, right? Or to hurt me? That's what this is. You want to push me away, make me hate you so it won't matter whether you can say it. And then, just maybe, you can fool yourself into thinking you don't feel it. So, go ahead... what's stopping you?" I asked, almost breathless, emphasising every word.

His jaw clenched so tight, I expected shards of tooth to come flying out of his mouth. His body whirled from me, one hand slapping down hard against the opposite wall with a heavy thud while the other grasped the nape of his neck. The fight in me evaporated. My breath left me in a heavy exhale.

"You don't have to do this, Ren. You're scared to lose anyone else; I get it. You've lost so much already. But doesn't that mean you should hang onto the things you have? I'm here, Ren, right here, and I'm telling you I'm going nowhere."

The line of his shoulders tensed, bunching up around his neck. Closing the slight distance between us, I placed a timid hand on his back and pressed my forehead down into the hollow between his shoulder blades. My brows pulled down and my eyes swept closed.

"I'm going nowhere. I promise."

He straightened, pulling his shoulders back, before turning and stalking off down the hall without another word. My hand fell to my side and my heart settled somewhere in the pit of my stomach. I tracked his departure until he disappeared from sight.

"Handled that like a boss, babe," Liss praised gently as she pushed through the double doors seconds later, a sandwich in each hand.

Falling into step beside her, I took the sandwich, wrapping both hands around it. "I'll get yours tomorrow," I said.

"After that display? Not necessary. Free subs for life."

A wry smile tugged at my lips as I shook my head. "Excessively generous but I accept, and no take backsies."

"Are you kidding? Did you see Raya's ass getting unceremoniously dumped on the floor like a sack of potatoes back there? I'll be replaying that shit in my head for years to come. You've more than earned a free lunch."

If avoiding me was an Olympic sport, Reno would have taken gold, no contest. When he bothered to show up to school, he acted as if I didn't exist. That hurt. But he didn't let Raya sit on his lap at lunch anymore, and he seemed to ignore her as much as he did me. That made up for it a little. But if Reno won gold for ignoring me, Raya took first place for getting all up in my face at every possible opportunity. Case in point...

"Oh great," I drawled sarcastically as she rounded the corner and strutted in my direction with an exaggerated sway to her hips, her shiny black hair fastened in a severe high pony that pulled her features taut. "And there I was just starting to worry that I might get through a day without bumping into you. Not sure how I would have coped."

Her chin jutted out as she came to a stop and slammed my locker door shut, very nearly taking the skin of my nose with it.

Brow lifted, I faced her, and snapped, "Wanna watch it? We don't all have a plastic surgeon on speed dial. I'm sure your guy's booked out for the next few weeks trying to fix that botch job he did on your face."

Hand still planted on my locker door, she leaned in. "I'd say I could recommend someone to help you out with all this." She swirled a finger in a full circle in front of my face, glossy pout turning down in distaste. "But I don't know anyone that talented."

"Yeah, I see that," I muttered. "Judging by your face, I'd say the level of talent you're accustomed to is one step up from a trained monkey armed with a scalpel. But then, what else can you expect from a backstreet clinic that lets you pay in blow jobs."

"Look, you pathetic bitch, I'm not interested in trading insults with you. You're not worth it."

I scoffed.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Just in case you haven't got the message yet... stay away from Reno. He doesn't want you. I was by his side long before you came on the scene, and I'll still be there when he's forgotten all about you. I'm his queen."

Leaning sideways against my locker, I cocked my head and squinted at her. "If you're so sure about that, what's got you so threatened?"

Her nostrils flared as her eyes assessed me like she was plotting all the ways she could murder me in her head. "Just stay away, tramp."

My mouth snapped open, eyebrows hitting my hairline. "Oh, I'm the tramp?"

"Well, what do you call someone who hops between best friends like they're rides at a state carnival?"

I barked out a laugh. "Oh, that's rich! I doubt there's a single ride at the carnival you haven't tried out yet."

"You know, that mouth of yours will get you in a lot of trouble one of these days."

"And yours is what you'll use on your future pimp to score your next fix when you're a strung-out, coked up hooker one day." Some part of me felt bad as soon as the words left my mouth. Even the voice in

my head said low blow. But I didn't start this. I didn't accost her outside of her locker and try to swipe her crooked nose clean off her face when she was minding her own damn business, now did I?

Her fist slammed hard against the locker. A loud clang traveled the length of the empty hallway. "Shut the fuck up," she seethed, stepping closer, gaze scoping up and down the hall. Probably looking for witnesses.

Chin up, I met her step with one of my own. "Make me."

I knew we'd come to blows one day, but I'd have preferred it not to be in the middle of the school hall. I couldn't really risk a suspension this close to graduation. No way in hell would I back down to her, though.

A few students ambled through the doorway. We stared each other down for a while, before she took a step back, raising a hand and flashing some god-awful talons in my face.

"Like I'd waste my acrylics on you." Her eyes roved up and down my body with contempt. "Got them done special for my boyfriend's birthday party tonight."

The barb struck exactly where she'd intended. But I'd be damned if a single part of me showed it. I was aware of the party, a small gathering for Reno's eighteenth, which he would have just ignored. But with all the shit life had thrown at him, it was especially important to celebrate the good. I'd overheard the guys talking about it in a conversation. Given its abrupt ending and their remorseful expressions when they'd noticed me, apparently it wasn't something they'd intended for me to hear.

Safe to say, I wasn't on the guest list. I hadn't planned on going. I'd made efforts to talk to him the past few days, continued to text him, and blatantly refused to lay down and die, but I'd drawn the line at showing up to a party he didn't invite me to. So no, I'd had zero plans to attend.

Until now.

I flashed Raya my brightest smile. "Thanks for letting me know, I'll be sure to dress up real nice."

"Oh, hell no, that wasn't an invitation, bitch."

Twisting the combination on my locker door, I brushed past her, deliberately bumping her with my shoulder. "Oh, it wasn't? Sounded like one." I peered back at her, shooting her a wink. "See you there."

Damn, she was mad. Her face was as red as her big fake fingernails.

Twenty-Seven

Riley

Standing in front of the narrow, full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door, I ran my hands down the front of the short, black, form-fitting dress, nervously smoothing out invisible creases. I'd curled my dirty blonde hair in tousled waves that hung well below my shoulders now. I rarely wore a lot of make-up, but I'd spent over an hour contouring and highlighting, creating a smokey eye with thick, winged liner, after watching about four hundred YouTube video tutorials. I wasn't a natural, far from it, but the result wasn't too bad. I looked like an older, edgier version of myself.

I also looked like someone who was about to wimp out.

Three messages and one call from Liss sat unanswered. I'd made a knee jerk decision, because of my confrontation with Raya earlier today, which I highly regretted now. Pulling my eyes from my reflection, I snatched my phone off the bed, grimacing as I read Liss' most recent text.

Liss: On my way. Don't even THINK about bailing. I'll hunt you down and haul your ass there over my shoulder...

Awesome. Apparently, my rash decisions didn't come with a cooling-off period. Sinking down onto the edge of the mattress, I bounced the phone against my bare thigh, nervous energy coursing through me.

I rode to and from school with Liss most days. My mom had agreed to let me use her car on the days she didn't need it, but I held a very real, and not altogether irrational, fear that I might hit some unsuspecting pedestrian and kill them, so I rarely took her up on that offer. During the ride home this afternoon, I'd regaled Liss with the details of my encounter with Raya. She'd exploded into an expletive-laden rant, which culminated in her declaration to attend the party with me as the uninvited plus one to my uninvited self. Suffice to say, I'd spent the rest of the afternoon lamenting my poor choices and regretting opening my big fat mouth. A horn honked, and I groaned, debating ignoring it. Ten seconds later, it honked again.

"Jeeeeeez Louise." I dragged my butt up and stepped through my bedroom doorway.

Grabbing a small purse and stuffing my phone inside, the horn honked once more, the sound obnoxiously louder and more prolonged.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, you dragon," I muttered under my breath, eyes scanning the room as I carried out an extended mental checklist. Considering all I needed was myself, my phone, and my keys, all of which I had in my possession, some might say I was stalling. My best friend, it seemed, fell into that category.

Her honk dragged on as if she'd hopped up and sat on the damn thing. Yanking the door open, I shoved my head around it and squinted my eyes at her. "Really?"

She grinned, shrugging her shoulders with a chuckle before holding both hands up in a protestation of faux innocence. "What? My hand slipped."

I rolled my eyes, slamming the door closed behind me before locking up.

"Man, you're impatient," I huffed as I slumped inelegantly into the passenger seat.

"I'll work on that," she assured me, winking a perfectly made-up eye in my direction. I fought back a smile. "You wanted to back out."

It wasn't a question. I didn't answer it. Instead, I inhaled a long, calming breath, gently shaking my head and repeating the phrase don't kill best friend, over and over.

Liss pulled over just in front of the square patch of grass that ran parallel to the narrow pathway leading to Leon's detached clapboard house. It took me less than a second to

spot Raya and her gaggle of groupies standing on the front porch, directly in front of the door, as if they'd taken it upon themselves to act as event security.

"Ten bucks says they don't accept our fake IDs," Liss quipped.

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A curt laugh slipped past my lips as I unbuckled. "Let's get this shit over with."

Four hostile sets of eyes fell on us as we advanced up the pathway. To say their looks were scathing would have been kind.

"Oh look," Liss droned, sarcasm dripping from her words, "our very own welcoming committee. You shouldn't have."

Raya took a step forward, planting a hand on either side of the wooden handrail that lined each side of the steps to the porch, barring our way. Her eyes ran a slow path up and down my body.

"Thought you said you were going to dress up nice? What happened?" She sniggered.

I tilted my head. "I know, I know, I must have missed the memo, no one told me the dress code was show up naked... or is that just you?" I hiked a brow, mirroring her contemptuous appraisal. My eyes skimmed over the barely-there skirt that failed to cover her underwear, and the scrap of material she wore across her chest that concealed her nipples, but that was it. There was enough under-boob on display to earn her a citation for indecent exposure.

Her eye twitched, chin jutting out. "You fucking wish you could pull off this look."

"What look's that, then... sex worker chic?"

I could see the vein in her forehead bulging before she spat, "You really are desperate. Showing up to a party nobody wants you at. It's beyond embarrassing." The mean girls behind her tittered, speaking out in agreement. When I began my ascent up the steps, Raya shook her head. "When will you get it through your thick skull? My man has no interest in your scrawny ass."

Liss brushed past me, moving until she reached the top step, forcing Raya to arch backward as she got in her face. "Speaking of asses, did you bust an implant when

Reno threw you on yours the other day? Because your backside is looking a little,” her head tilted, peering around Raya's side, “... uneven.” She ended in a mock whisper, grimacing with an exaggerated wince.

“Fuck you, Lissa. Nobody asked for your opinion.” Ashley’s screechy voice entered the fray.

“Well, it’s lucky I’m happy to provide my advice unsolicited then, isn’t it? Because none of you yes men would tell her she looks like someone stuck a pin in one of her blow-up ass cheeks. Or how mortified she should be rocking up in this ensemble... I wear more than this in the shower.”

When Raya would have opened her duck lips to defend her wardrobe choices or toss around more insults, I stuck my hand up. “Save it, this is boring. Just kindly back the hell up and have your guard dogs stand down. We will gladly stay away from you for the rest of the evening. With the way you’re dressed, I don’t know if you were planning on staying out here all night to solicit sex from passing cars or what, but we,” I wagged a finger between Liss and I, “came to party. So, shift your wonky ass.”

“You little—”

“Raya... move. Last I checked, this is my place and I decide who gets in.” Leon’s deep voice resonated as he emerged through the door onto the porch.

Raya remained unmoving for a beat before she exhaled harshly through her nose, nostrils flaring as she reluctantly released her grip and moved aside just enough for us to squeeze past her. When she shifted a foot forward slightly as if to trip me, I pulled up short and stepped over it, raising my head on the way by and throwing her a condescending stare. “Grow up.”

An hour later, I wondered if Reno had even bothered to attend his own birthday party since I’d yet to catch sight of him. His birthday wasn’t until tomorrow, but Leon’s mom and step-dad were out of town at some work fundraiser in the city tonight, leaving the house empty for what was not the small gathering I’d expected.

Leon had regarded me with an unreadable expression as I’d strode past him into the house earlier.

“Surprised to see me?” I’d asked, injecting a little sass into my tone to cover my hurt at the

deliberate exclusion. They’d drawn sides without my knowledge or consent, and Leon hadn’t landed on mine. I was glad of that, I truly was. Reno needed him much more than I did, but still, the entire situation saddened me. He’d shrugged those big shoulders nonchalantly, hands planted in his pockets, like it was all a non-issue. But his normally

bright blue eyes were dull, sad, and he'd answered softly with a short no before disappearing into the crowd.

"Hey, I'm gonna go get a refill," I said to Liss, who was chatting with a girl named Sara. Sara was Jason's step-sister. Well, kind of. Their parents were together, and Sara and her mom relocated from Florida to move into Jason's dad's place last summer. She and Liss shared calc.

Sara seemed like a genuinely decent person: pretty, quiet, non-bitchy. I'd been dipping in and out of their conversation about college, stumbling over my answer when she'd asked where I was going. I'd applied to a couple of places. I'd also applied for financial aid and a scholarship, which wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. I achieved good grades, had selected AP classes and maintained a solid GPA throughout high school. I'd done everything, fully intending to go, but that was before.

Now, I just couldn't imagine leaving home to attend school. I was toying with the idea of attending community college for the next couple of years. Then I could consider my options again. With graduation creeping ever closer, the prospect of leaving my mom, and Reno, to go to school didn't sit well with me. Besides, I still had no inkling of what I wanted to do. Everything felt so up in the air, my life on pause while I lingered in limbo, waiting for things to level out, waiting for things that may never happen.

"You want anything?" I asked, casting aside the bleak thoughts. They both declined.

Refilled cup in hand, I meandered through the kitchen and into the rear yard. It wasn't a huge space, but it overflowed with Claremont students. Worming my way through several clusters of bodies, I quietly walked around the corner of the house, heading for the small wooden bench I knew I'd find by the side fencing in a quiet corner set away from the main part of the back yard. There wasn't a lot of light, so when I looked up and spotted a dark figure leaning back on the bench, I had to bite back a shriek, my steps faltering. I quickly established who it was.

I'd found the elusive birthday boy.

As I coaxed my heartbeat back to a normal rhythm, I made my way to Reno. Hooded eyes watched my approach, but he didn't move a muscle. I halted a few feet in front of him, feeling strangely awkward at not being able to anticipate how he would react. It was disconcerting. Agitated, I squeezed the sides of the plastic cup too hard and felt cool liquid trickle over my hand. Switching the cup to my dry hand, I stretched out my sticky fingers in a bid to relax them, to relax me, before shaking them out at my side to remove the moisture.

Glancing up from my task, I felt the heat from Reno's gaze as it raked over me, and catalogued the subtle changes in his demeanour as he took in my appearance. I noticed the way his fingertips pressed into his thighs before curling into fists. His throat bobbed as he swallowed and his breathing kicked up a fraction, his sculpted chest expanding,

stretching out his tee. He might be hell bent on lying to me, but his body reacted whether he wanted it to or not. One fist expanded slowly, large fingers spreading and flexing against his dark jeans. It felt like an eternity passed before he spoke.

"Thought you weren't invited," he said, voice deep and husky, his shadowed eyes settling on my face.

"I'm crashing," I offered.

He nodded, glancing away.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly, gathering the courage to slide down onto the bench, leaving a good chunk of space between us.

There was something unfamiliar about this Reno, this subdued, silent Reno, that I wasn't sure how to handle. He looked the same as ever, same soulful eyes and angled face, same dark hair, longer on top and swept a little to the side, begging me to run my fingers through it. Same hard body packed with lean muscle. But he seemed fragile somehow, a quality I never would have associated with him before. Amongst all these people here to celebrate him, he'd found a corner all alone out here in the dark. I doubted his family was far from his thoughts. I doubted they ever left them.

Without looking at me, he said, "You should leave."

The quiet request hung in the air between us. Placing the untouched beer on the ground by my feet, I planted both palms face down on the bench either side of my thighs, and pivoted until my body angled toward him, keeping half my face in shadow.

"That's what you want?" I shivered as a chill that had nothing to do with the weather washed through me.

He said nothing, staring off to the side, but tension marked every part of his body. Glancing down, I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip and considered my options. He didn't want me here, or maybe it was that he didn't want to want me here. I shouldn't have come. I'd known it all along. Inhaling a steadying breath through my nose, I swung my legs lightly back and forth, feet crossed at the ankles, and dragged the soles of my shoes over the loose gravel once, twice. Lifting a hand, I rubbed two fingers over my forehead and pressed my thumb into my temple to ease the building pressure.

It was so tempting to yell and shout, demand he quit pushing me away, that he let me in. But trying to force him had gotten me nowhere, less than nowhere, and looking over at his hunched form, I couldn't bring myself to raise my voice. Leaning in without

thinking, I brushed my lips against the side of his jaw, letting them linger a little too long as I savored the feel of his scruff against my skin. When I inhaled, his scent filled my nostrils. His body tensed, a low rumble sounding in his chest.

Pulling back reluctantly, I whispered, "Okay... I'll go."

I rose to my feet and took two steps before I stopped, my back to him, and said quietly, "Happy birthday tomorrow, Maddox."

Then I walked away.

Twenty-Eight

Riley

A couple of hours after leaving the party, a muffled bang against the side of my trailer had me lifting my head from the books spread out over my grey patchwork bedspread, my brows dipping low. I tapped the screen on my phone, noting it was only eleven forty-five. Way too early for my mom. Tugging the pen from between my teeth, I pushed off the bed and headed for the door as it rattled with the force of several loud knocks. Lifting onto my tiptoes, I peered through the window. My breath caught in my throat and my pulse kicked into high gear when Reno's face came into view. Flicking the lock without pause, I pulled the door back.

"Hey," I said.

Reno swayed a little, shifting to lean his weight against the side of the trailer as he focused his gaze on the toe of his shoe trailing a pattern in the dry mud, before kicking a lump of stone into the shadows. Silently resting my cheek against the edge of the door, I bit my lip as I waited, taking in the hard line of his jaw and sharp cut of his cheekbones outlined in the moonlight. My fingers ached with the need to trace them, to touch him.

Eventually, his head lifted, and slightly unfocused chocolate brown eyes met mine. A myriad of emotions—too many to decipher and each battling for precedence—swirled in their depths. Reno's hand rose slowly, catching a swaying lock of my hair between his fingers and rubbing softly. His brows came together, eyes narrowing.

"Your hair looks nice," he murmured, voice low, before his lids squeezed closed. He slumped a little farther against the aluminium exterior of the trailer, his face sloping closer to mine as his expression turned pained. "Why do you have to be so goddamn beautiful, Ri?"

He let out a groan, the sound a combination of frustration and desperation. The strands of my hair slipped from his grasp as his arm slumped heavily to his side. I swallowed roughly, not sure what to say. He twisted, pressing his forehead into the aluminium.

“Fuck, I miss you,” he said, voice anguished. He lifted his tortured gaze to mine. “I miss you. So fucking much, it hurts.”

His harsh declaration ignited a small flame inside

my chest, a tiny flicker of warmth that spread cautiously outward. I inched closer to him, bridging the distance between us until our faces were almost touching.

“I’m right here,” I whispered, my voice shaky.

Our gazes caught and held, his tormented.

“Then why do you feel so fucking far away?”

His words tore at my insides, stabbed at my heart. Twin tears rolled down my cheeks as my head swayed left to right. He straightened, hands reaching for me and cupping my face, even as his brow creased at the sight, like he’d had no intention of doing it.

“Do you have any fucking idea how hard it is to stay away from you?” His thumbs brushed across my cheeks, tracing over the trails of moisture that coated my skin.

“I never asked you to,” I said, my voice a choked breath. My heart thumped wildly against my rib cage at his touch, at the heated look in his eyes and the depth of emotion in his words. “I don’t want you to.”

He watched me for a few seconds, gaze running over every inch of my face, before his head lowered and his hands dropped from me. He took a step back.

“I have to.”

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I stared at him, my breath frozen and my entire body trembling as I whispered, “Then why are you here?”

He reacted slowly. The fire building in his eyes wasn’t without conflict, his internal battle played out over his face. But his gaze dropped to my lips and his eyes hooded. We moved at the same time, fusing together like magnets as we gripped and held on tight. And then our lips collided. His large hands clutched the sides of my face, dragging me closer to him as his mouth fitted against mine. My fingers thrust into his hair, latching on and fastening him to me, knowing how tenuous the situation was, how real the possibility that he might pull away at any second. His palms left my face and slid down

the column of my throat, skirting over my breasts and down my sides, until they grabbed my hips and pulled my body flush against his.

My head fell back at the contact, and Reno seized the opportunity to drag his lips over my jaw then my exposed neck, leaving a wet trail as he sucked lightly on the sensitive skin before moving lower. He pressed kisses to my collarbone and chest then stopped abruptly, breathing hard as his mouth hovered just above the swell of my breasts. His chest expanded roughly, and my lungs locked in place, my breath halting in a combination of heady anticipation and pure fear. Fear that he'd stop this, that he'd leave me. He clutched onto my hips, holding himself rigid as he wrestled with his thoughts. I could almost see his internal struggle: keep going or force himself to stop. I decided I wasn't prepared to accept the latter.

With a boldness I didn't completely feel, my hands moved down, smoothing slowly over the corded muscle of Reno's chest. Slipping them between our joined bodies, I hooked my thumbs under the thin straps of my cami. His head tipped back a fraction, his darkened eyes honing in on the movement. Inhaling shakily, my fingers trembling, I slid the loose material down over my shoulders, knowing Reno's body would shield me from view, and tugged until it fell and pooled at my waist. His harsh intake of breath coincided with his fingers biting into my soft flesh, his groin rolling into me involuntarily. My breath hitched, an ache settling between my thighs. I felt my body squirm, powerless to control my reaction. Reno groaned low in his throat.

"Riley..." he grated, gaze locked on my exposed chest, hands kneading my hips.

Overcome with my need for him—to be close to him, to touch him and feel his touch—my lips parted, the plea falling from them unashamed when he raised his eyes to mine, boring into me with a naked desire and sizzling intensity that threatened to burn me to ash. "Please."

There was a half second pause, a brief moment of hesitation, before Reno's mouth descended again, swooping down to claim mine. His hands lowered to grip the backs of my thighs and he lifted. My legs opened instinctively, wrapping around him. Fastening my arms around his neck, I returned his kiss with an unrestricted fervour, eliciting a groan from him. His tongue sneaked past my lips and plunged inside, swirling with mine. I swallowed his moan, breathing raggedly into him as he shifted, moving us until my back landed against the trailer, and cushioning the impact with his hands. He ground his lower half into me, using his hand on my back to anchor me in place, increasing the friction. His palms cupped my butt cheeks, splaying over the flesh, molding it and tugging me into him.

Breaking off, his chest heaving against mine, he growled, "Not here."

I frantically nodded my agreement, our lips coming together again even as he walked us through the door. Slamming it and flicking the lock, he hurried through the tiny hallway. Our hands groped, desperate bodies writhed, until he reached my bed and sank down on it, positioning me on his lap so I straddled him. I continued my assault on his mouth, rising on my knees to get closer, greedy hands fisting clumps of his hair. All the while, my blood thundered in my ears and my heart pounded behind my breastbone. And when Reno's hands found my hips again, slowly rolling me down as he thrust up, my eyelids squeezed tighter. The feel of him beneath me sent waves of pleasure shooting through me. Sensation flooded every cell, and every nerve end sparked.

My fingers moved to the hem of his shirt and tugged. It cleared as far as his chest before he stopped me, his rough hands closing around mine. My eyes shot open, flying to his in question. Battling with the unbridled lust clouding Reno's gaze, was uncertainty. So much of it.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice unsteady. He glanced down, brow creasing. I dipped my head, trying to catch his gaze. "Ren?"

He looked up with questioning eyes. "Is this what you want?"

It wasn't hard to read the self-recrimination on his face, the desire to turn back the clock and do things differently. There was no doubt in my mind. I knew what I wanted.

Wrapping both hands around the back of his head and overlapping my fingers, I nodded firmly. "Yes. And I wanted it then, too."

Searching eyes flicked between both of mine, seeking words I hadn't said, looking for a sign that he should back off. He wouldn't find one. Carefully, he lifted my body, placing me on the bed by his thighs. I shifted back on my elbows, kicking books carelessly to the floor as I slid up the mattress and parted my legs to accommodate him. His broad frame rose over me, lowering as I flattened my back to the bed. Within seconds, Reno covered me completely, the wide expanse of his chest blocking everything else from sight until he was all I could see and feel. His biceps flexed and bulged on either side of my head, big arms caging me. Resting on one elbow, he splayed a warm palm over my chest, covering my heart. There was no way he wouldn't feel the erratic, rapid beat pulsing against his skin.

I swallowed roughly as his hand crept down. His hair fell onto his forehead, his deep brown eyes trained intently on mine, watching for my reaction, as his palm closed around my naked breast. My head pushed back into the pillow, breath leaving me in a silent gasp as my lips parted. His head dipped and his tongue coated my nipple in wet heat. His free hand reached to pinch the other between his thumb and finger. Sensations bombarded me from all sides, a warmth pooling between my thighs. I needed more, more of him.

Pace suddenly frantic, I tore at his shirt, pulling it up his back and over his head, then brought his lips back to mine. My fingers found his waistband, working quickly to loosen the buttons and shrug his jeans down over his butt, using my feet to push them down his legs and kick them to the floor. He gripped my cotton shorts, tearing them down my hips as his mouth traveled hungrily over my stomach, pausing when he reached my center. Leaning back, he inhaled deeply as he trailed one finger down over the surface of my skin until it skirted along the edge of my panties, and then it slid beneath them and pressed into me. My body arched, lungs faltering as I choked out a cry of ecstasy.

Reno's lids shuttered, air escaping him in a drawn out exhale that made his chest shudder. His underwear just clearing his butt, he sat back on his heels, moving his possessive gaze over me lazily. Grasping the waistband of my panties, he lowered them down my legs. Heat and hunger flooded his eyes. His hands stilled as his jaw clenched.

"Riley," he ground out through gritted teeth. "Stop me now if this isn't what you want. I need you to say it. I need to hear you say it this time."

I shook my head, heavy lids half mast, my teeth almost piercing through my bottom lip. "I don't want you to stop."

He nodded once, grabbed his discarded jeans and pulled out a foil packet, before rolling it over his length. My eyes widened at the sight, heart racing as he positioned himself over me, hips settling between my thighs. He waited until our eyes connected, and then he slid inside. His lids drifted closed as he slowly filled me, a stifled curse escaping his lips. He hung his head between his wide shoulders, the muscles in his arms and neck straining as he held himself still for a moment.

Emotions almost too intense to bear crashed into me all at once, like a tidal wave, as my body stretched around him. I slammed my eyes shut, overwhelmed.

"Open your eyes, Riley," Reno demanded. He began to move, steadily increasing his pace. I shook my head blindly, refusing him, feeling too raw, too vulnerable. Feeling too much, and afraid to let him see it. "Open your eyes, Ri... I need to see you."

Swallowing my fear, I opened my eyes and met his. Everything I felt for him, I could see reflected in his penetrating gaze. His eyes couldn't hide him from me. Pushing up on my elbows, I pressed my open lips to his before curling my hands around his sides and over the hard planes of his back. My nails dug into his flesh and held on tight as he withdrew again, and plunged back in. He settled into a perfect rhythm, his body driving into mine, every thrust taking us to dizzying heights... and his eyes never strayed from mine, not once. It felt like he was imprinting himself on my soul. He didn't need to. He already owned it.

Pressure built at my core, coiling tighter and tighter like a spring, until it felt like I couldn't take anymore and gasps shot from my op

en lips. And then I crashed off the edge. Reno's mouth caught my cry as I fell apart, my body contracting around him as white light exploded behind my eyes and pleasure coursed through every cell in my body. He followed me over seconds later, movements jerky and erratic as he thrust into me as far as he could go, his mouth opening over mine on a silent groan before he stilled, damp head falling into the hollow beneath my throat.

I felt a smile form on my lips as his weight sank into me, our chests slick with sweat and our pounding hearts beating in sync between us. It was everything I'd imagined, everything I'd wished our first time had been. It was everything I'd ever wanted.

It was too good to last.

Twenty-Nine

Riley

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He withdrew emotionally before he'd left my body. I sensed the shift in him as reality crashed in, as realization dawned like a blinding light and his shutters came down, forging a distance between us I wouldn't have thought possible only a few minutes ago. Without making eye contact, Reno moved to the edge of the bed, tugging on his underwear and throwing his shirt over his head. He shoved both legs into his jeans, shrugging them over his thighs and doing up the buttons without uttering a word or glancing in my direction.

A solid lump formed in my throat as I watched him retreat, disappointment surging in me. I'd naively believed this would change things, that we'd crossed a bridge and we could pick up where we left off... before. Lifting myself to a sitting position at the head of the bed, I pulled my bent knees up under my chin and wrapped my arms around them tightly. Tears sat just behind my lids, begging to fall, but I forced them back.

"Hey," I murmured, voice thick with emotion, "you okay?"

He stilled at my words, his shoulders tightening. He didn't look up as he responded gruffly, "Yeah." Claspings his hands between his splayed legs, he said, "Are you?"

His voice was flat, devoid of any emotion. He could have been talking to a stranger in the street, instead of inquiring about the emotional state of the girl he'd just had sex with, then emotionally deserted before pulling out of her body.

My head bobbed automatically, whether to reassure myself or him I didn't know. Either way, it was a lie. I wasn't okay. But I continued nodding until I realized he couldn't see it. I opened my lips to verbalize my response, then stopped myself. Even if I was sure I could get the words out, I deserved a single glance, just one. If he wanted to know how I was, I wanted him to look at me.

His head lowered, dipping between his thighs, and his clenched knuckles pressed into his forehead. When he finally turned, tilting his head to the side just far enough to see my face, I immediately wished I hadn't forced his hand. A deep crease lined his forehead. His face was hard and his jaw tight. We should have stopped; that's what he was thinking. It was so clear on his face; it was like I was reading his mind through a wall of glass.

Hurt sliced through my chest like a sharpened blade, and I wondered how much pain a heart could withstand before it became too damaged to repair. How many blows it could take before it shattered so completely the pieces wouldn't fit back together the way they had before. Witnessing the regret that plagued him both times we'd done this devastated me, but it was the depth of sadness in his eyes, the despondency that blanketed him like a heavy fog, that was utterly heartbreaking. I wanted to fix him. I wanted to believe that I could. But giving him my body did nothing. If anything, it seemed to make things worse. I didn't know what else I could do, but I couldn't contemplate a different alternative; I had to be able to fix him. I couldn't bring myself to consider that the damage to his heart might be irrevocable. That I might never be able to put him back together.

Swallowing roughly, he said, "I should head out."

I nodded mutely, my eyes staring off somewhere over his shoulder. My vision misted as tears pooled, impatient to flow freely. Standing, Reno crossed the distance to the bedroom door in two long strides, then stopped before he walked through. Angling his body slightly back toward me, he turned his head, his eyes downcast.

"Riley..." he began before breaking off. My breath caught in my lungs, both hope and fear gripped me. "This doesn't—" He shook his head and cleared his throat. "Nothing has changed."

My lids lowered and the dam broke. He cursed, crossing back to me with quick strides.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Riley. I don't want to fucking hurt you. I don't... fuck, I don't know what the hell I'm doing." He dropped in front of me, his hands lifting my face to his.

His concerned gaze roved over every inch. "I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here. This just makes it harder."

"It doesn't have to."

His eyes lingered a few seconds longer, before he touched his forehead to mine briefly. Raising his lips, he dropped a kiss there before releasing me and striding for the door.

"Reno?" I called out, and he halted. I jumped quickly from the bed and pulled open the top drawer in my bedside cabinet. Walking up behind him, I tucked the wrapped gift into the hand by his side. "Happy Birthday," I whispered. "I'm never far, okay? I'll be right here if you need me."

His head tipped a fraction to the slim package in his hand. His fingers closed around it until his knuckles whitened. I heard his deep inhalation before he nodded and left.

I didn't see him again over the weekend, and he didn't show at school on Monday or Tuesday. I glimpsed him ducking into class on Wednesday and again when he was making his way through the student parking lot that afternoon. We shared two classes this semester, but he hadn't been to either since he lost Owen and Brett. He'd gone to all the others, but not those. He couldn't even sit in a classroom with me. I'd mentioned it to Leon, trying to sound as non-stalkerish as possible, and he'd told me to stop stressing. If only it were that easy.

Leon picked that moment to stride through the classroom door. Making his way through the desks, he dropped into the one directly behind mine and snagged the end of my ponytail, tugging once before releasing it. I swivelled immediately, uncaring that Mrs. Hannigan had just called for attention. Around me, kids started pocketing their phones and ending conversations.

"Where is he?"

"Miss Mason? Can I have your eyes up front, please?"

Leon's blue gaze flickered over my shoulder to the front of the room, and then to the wide expanse of glass to his left, before returning to mine. He jerked his head toward the window.

"Miss Mason?"

The back of my head still facing the teacher, my eyes strayed to the glass. My fingers tightened around the back of the seat when they landed on the solitary figure cutting across the student parking lot, rounding the corner and heading in the direction of the auditorium.

"Miss Mason?"

"Ri?" Leon muttered, grabbing my attention and nodding to where Mrs. Hannigan stood, most likely scowling. Instead of spinning around, I pushed up from the seat, grabbed my backpack and paced toward the door.

"Miss Mason!" Mrs. Hannigan sputtered, eyes popping wide behind the frames of her glasses. "Where are you going? Riley? Riley, you're not permitted to leave my class without a pass."

Pausing to offer her a quick glance, I said, "I feel sick to my stomach. I'm going to the nurse."

She repeated my name, but I broke into a jog, traversing the hallways like I was being chased, which I very well might have been. I approached the door nearest the parking lot and burst through, my heart running a mile a minute.

Reno spotted me as soon as I came into view. These days, I knew when he'd seen me because his body stilled completely, every part of him suddenly on edge as if he had to keep himself in check and guard his reaction. Slinging my bag down by his feet on the second to top tier of the old auditorium, I stood over him, trying to catch my breath without outright heaving and wheezing. Nobody would ever accuse me of being athletic, but I'd rather not advertise just how out of shape I was.

He looked away. Moments passed in silence.

"Haven't seen you since the weekend?" The question was my way of asking maybe a dozen different things, things that I couldn't find it in me to say out loud for fear I'd scare him off... or I wouldn't like the answers. Where have you been? Are you avoiding me? Have you been eating and sleeping okay? Why don't you come to class? Do you regret being with me? The last was the scariest, but really, the list went on, there was so much I wanted to know. But I wasn't his mother and nor was I his girlfriend anymore... if I ever had been. I wasn't even sure I could call myself his friend at this point. I was back to being his nothing.

My eyes stared at the side of his head, like maybe I could break inside if I focused hard enough. I could fight my way in and shift some things around so he could see me the way he did before.

He didn't answer my question, or any of the million unspoken ones. Voice low, attention diverted away from me, he said, "Thank you. For the gift."

It was crazy how the tiniest crumb caused an overload of emotion to rush through me. Biting my lip to stop a giddy smile from breaking out, I simply nodded, clearing my throat to move aside the boulder his words had created.

"You're welcome." I'd put an old picture of Reno and Owen from a few years ago in a wooden frame. "I remember taking that picture of you two. I think it's always been my favorite."

More silence. I swallowed.

"Did you, uh, did you have a nice birthday? You know, as much as..." I trailed off, realizing what I was about to say. As much as you could after you woke up alone, as much as you could on your first birthday without your father and brother...

"Yeah," he muttered, sparing me the most fleeting of glances as he stood. He made his way down the lower tiers. I bit the inside of my lip in frustration. The auditorium used to be for bands and theatre performances and such, maybe ten or more years ago, but it mostly sat empty now ever since the school buildings underwent an extensive remodel.

Unthinking, I snatched my bag and trailed after him, my footsteps carrying me at a far slower pace than his.

"Ren... would you just stop? Please?" I wasn't sure that he would, but he did, his hands gripping his hips, his head down. Reaching him, I placed a firm hand on his forearm, my lungs protesting the second bout of physical exertion in less than thirty minutes. "We can't even be friends now? Can't talk to each other? Christ, you were inside me a few days ago!"

The whole situation shredded my insides, until it felt like everything swirled around inside of me, untethered. I felt untethered, ungrounded. Our relationship had always been dysfunctional, but we'd had one. Few days passed where we didn't have some interaction, and I'd needed it. That was before I'd even realized I'd fallen for him. And now... nothing. In fact, this. It was worse than nothing. Moisture stung my lids and I bit out a curse, gritting my teeth. Dammit, I couldn't do this again.

"No point making things harder." It was that robot voice again, the one where a freaking cyborg asked a random human for directions. I couldn't take it. This stilted, closed off Reno may as well have been an alien for all the resemblance he bore to the old, confident, cocky, teasing Reno.

My chin lifted, a bite of anger slashing through the ever-present pain and heartache.

"Make what harder? Cutting me completely out of your life? Pretending I don't exist? Forgetting that you came to my trailer drunk and had sex with me? Ignoring the fact that I love you and I'm trying so fucking hard to be here for you!" My voice had risen with each heated word. I knew I was screeching by the end of my tirade, my hands fisting and chest heaving.

"Well, fucking stop!" he yelled, taking me aback. Shock registered in his eyes the exact moment it did in mine. He exhaled roughly, thrusting a hand up over his face then

through his hair. Voice calmer, he said, "Just stop, Riley. Stop forcing your way into my life." He stressed each word. Like he meant them.

My heart felt like it broke apart inside my chest. Actual physical pain bloomed. Like my ribs had cracked and the jagged edges pierced my insides. Lids flowing closed, I rocked my head from side to side and inhaled through my nose. I'd allowed him into my heart against my better judgement, and what did I get? A swift boot through it. I couldn't begin to understand his pain, but I was standing here offering to share it, and he was throwing my every effort back in my face.

Opening narrowed eyes on him and refusing to curtail my acrimony, I said, "Well, maybe you should have thought about that before you forced your way into mine."

I knew the anger would be short lived, and I'd regret lashing out at him when he was adrift in such turbulent waters. But I squared my shoulders, turned on my heel, and stormed away from him, feeling rudderless and empty.

My feet carried me forward without knowing the direction or destination. They just kept me moving, treading water until... I didn't even know anymore.

He'd twisted me round in circles and then stepped back to watch the fallout.

Thirty

Reno

"You coming with?" Le asked.

I shook my head, spinning the cap on the bottle in my hand. Leon planted his ass down on my sofa. I felt rather than saw his head shift, his eyes landing on me.

"How long you planning on avoiding her?"

I stood and walked to the counter, setting the empty water bottle in the recycling.

"She's messed up, Ren. Like, really hurting."

He had no concept of the agony his words inflicted. I planted both palms flat on the surface of the countertop and squeezed my eyelids closed, fighting every single instinct I had. All I wanted to do was crush every bit of hurt and sadness clouding her gorgeous green eyes. But the fact was, I'd put them there. And I couldn't achieve what I was trying to achieve without hurting her. Didn't mean that seeing it and hearing about it didn't kill me. What was the alternative? Do what I did last weekend? I'd cracked. I'd sat on that bench long after she'd left, and I hadn't been able to erase the devastation on her face or the pain in her voice. They'd repeated on a loop in my mind until I'd wanted to smash my way through everything in my path. Numbing myself hadn't helped, instead

of making everything go away, the half bottle of whiskey had weakened my defenses. Her beautiful fucking face, those slim curves wrapped tight in a little black dress, had taken up every inch of space in my head. She'd been the only damn thing I'd wanted.

And I'd found myself outside her trailer, knocking on her door.

Thinking about that night wasn't good for me. If I were being honest with myself, I'd say it scared the shit out of me. Staring down at her wavy blonde hair spread out over the pillow beneath me, her cheeks flushed and her trusting eyes gazing right into mine, feelings I thought I'd forced into submission had hit me square in the chest with the force of a sledgehammer. The thought of letting her go, of walking away and leaving her, had wrecked me. For a second, I'd thought about staying. So, I'd disconnected before she'd even stopped clenching around me. Then I'd brought up a fucking ten-inch thick wall and reinforced it with steel.

We didn't have a future. There was no us. I had to remember that. I couldn't keep slipping carelessly in and out of her life, muddying the waters and blurring the lines, just because I couldn't control my dick. We both needed a clean break. Even if it had taken everything I had in me to walk out of that room.

Unimpressed by my lack of response, Leon pushed to his feet, his head shaking and his eyes speaking his displeasure better than any words could. "I'll leave you to it, then?" He posed it as a question and hesitated, awaiting a response.

Face impassive, I obliged. "Yeah, sure."

He exhaled through his nose, a clear snort of displeasure, before he turned and pulled the door open. "Yeah, sure man."

My mouth opened, unplanned words spewing from my lips, "Le..."

He pivoted swiftly, brows raised. Mine drew together. I fucking knew I shouldn't say it, but I was about to, anyway. "Watch out for her... yeah?"

The corners of his lips twitched briefly, like he knew I'd tried to stop myself, and couldn't. Throwing me a quick salute, he dipped his head, eyes solemn when he replied, "Always."

I didn't know why the fuck his response had my hands fisting; the skin stretching taut over my knuckles. Or why I wanted to tear his face off. But I stood there, face blank, watching my best friend leave to go take care of my fucking girl, and all I knew was, I fucking hated it.

I was still stewing, trying to figure out what the hell my problem was, when I heard his phone ring through the open window.

“Yo? What!?”

My eyes narrowed at the change in his tone and I edged closer, my curiosity peaked. Leon stood motionless, phone pressed to his ear, his free hand landing on the back of his head.

“What the fuck is she doing there?” He dropped his hand, digging into his pocket for his keys and jogging for his car. “I’m on my way. You called Mack? Just tell him to meet me there.” He cursed, shut his phone off and flung the driver side door open.

“Le?” I called. His head lifted, blue eyes meeting my questioning ones. “What’s up?”

Wedging himself between the open door and the car, he gripped the edge of the frame. His other hand rested on the roof, playing with the keys in his grasp, as he weighed up the benefits of

telling me. We both knew he’d tell me. Resignation flashed in his gaze. Drawing his lips tight, he cocked his head.

“That was Liss. Riley’s wasted.”

I felt my chest tighten; my shoulders immediately stiffen. That was before he finished.

“She’s over at Baker’s field.”

My jaw strained. I could tell by the look on his face I wouldn’t fucking like the next part.

“With half of Dalton’s fucking football team.”

I was moving before he got the words out, slamming the trailer door without bothering to lock it, and striding for Leon’s car. His forehead touched the roof of the car briefly and he muttered a fuck.

I threw the passenger door open and, as soon as his ass hit the leather, said, “Fucking drive.”

Dalton Academy. Otherwise known as the school for every rich, entitled prick in Richmond West. To say I felt uneasy was a massive fucking understatement. My knees bounced, fingers flexing. Christ, I’d have been less uptight if she were back in East side, slumming it with drug dealers and bare-knuckle fighters, which said a fucking lot about the character of those assholes from Dalton. These were guys who’d date rape a girl for daring to say no, because the word didn’t fucking apply to them. And the football Gods? Yeah... egos the size of the empire state building and wallets to match. Top it all off with

the fact that Mommy and Daddy's pockets happened to be deep enough to cover the cost of the average cop's integrity. These guys did whatever the fuck they wanted, and they were fucking untouchable with it. Riley with those guys, drunk... my teeth ground until my jaw ached. If they'd fucking touched her...

Leon swung the car into a muddy verge, the back tires sliding. I was out and pounding a path through the trees before it came to a complete stop.

"Ren! Fuck dude, hold up!"

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I didn't. I sped toward the clearing. The dim orange glow of the bonfire flickered into view through the leaves.

"The fuck? You can't run in there solo, dude! Goddammit, Ren! Argh... fucking great." I heard his pace increase as he followed.

His argument made sense. I'd get my ass handed to me if I strolled in there holding nothing but my dick. That meant fuck all to me right now. Riley was there. I was here. I wanted her where I could see her, where I knew she was safe, and that would be as fucking far away from that bunch of morally bankrupt motherfuckers as possible. That was literally the only thought on my mind as I stormed toward a bunch of Dalton's shitheads. Private school mama's boys who, if you saw them alone or even two or three together, would piss in their pants and run in the other direction. Packed up like tonight, outnumbering us four to one? Yeah, they'd be ballsy as fuck.

"Oh, hell no!"

My eyes scanning the collection of bodies fanning out from the bonfire, I didn't slow my gait or spare a glance as my entrance drew attention.

"You boys seen this shit? Looks like Claremont put all the trash out in our backyard tonight! Damn!"

My fists twitched. Fuck, I wanted to hurt him... Get Riley first. Fuck people up second.

"Ho, ho!" A second asshole hollered. "Dude, your ass needs to get the fuck back to that shithole town you call home. You fucking lost?"

This little bitch got inches from my face, fucking begging for a beat down. Lucky for him he had the money to fix his face after I rearranged it and shoved his shiny teeth down his throat. My fist lifted just as Le appeared in my peripheral and shoved the ugly blonde fuck, knocking him on his ass.

"Mack texted. Just pulled up," he panted. He stopped to catch his breath, his eyes immediately shifting to locate Riley and Liss. This seemed to be a private gathering, but it was still early. I'd only clocked five, maybe six guys so far. It made me fucking crazy thinking how vulnerable Ri was right now. Le's arm shot out as we rounded the fire, finger pointing. "There's Lissa."

My gaze darted in the direction he'd indicated. My legs kicked into action and my heart tried to fight its way through my fucking rib cage. Fuck, I didn't need to see anything that would push me over the edge. I already knew I was skirting it. One semi-decent reason away from mauling someone to death. Since Brett and O died, it felt like a beast had taken up residence in my head, angry as fuck and looking for any excuse to get out. But if someone had put their hands on Riley, I wouldn't need him. I'd kill them with my bare hands with a damn smile on my face, knowing that was all me.

It didn't escape me that the thought of seeing some other guy touching her blasted a wave of pure panic and primal rage through me. The idea had acid settling in my gut, bile rising. I couldn't handle that. Couldn't even think about it without wanting to put my fist through someone. That was a reality I had no intention of dealing with. Not now. Not ever.

Rounding the other side of the fire in stride with Le, adrenaline pumping through me like a drug, my pulse kicked into goddamn overdrive when my eyes landed on her. And my knees tried to buckle. Fuck, she was beautiful. I was a goddamn volcano ready to blow, but the sight of her hit me like a sucker punch. Every-damn-time. I just wanted to get my hands on her. Controlling that impulse never got any easier.

"Maddox, the renovator," the biggest cocksucker of them all drawled. "The fuck are you doing in my town?" Cool grey eyes observed my approach, but it was his arm I took issue with. The one draped around Riley's shoulder. That had me grinding my teeth to dust and my vision growing hazy, turning blood red.

Riley's blonde head shot up at the sound of my name, her glazed eyes finding me instantly. My heart fucking stopped. Her face lit up, eyes sparking, and her pink lips split into a wide grin, like she was happy as shit to see me. A split second later, they turned down and her eyes shadowed over as her whole face fell. It was fucking crushing. It damn near killed me to see how much I'd hurt her. The need to undo it was so fucking intense, I almost buckled under the weight of it. I wanted to carry her away from here and pretend like nothing could touch us. But I knew too much to fool myself. My eyes flicked back to dickhead number one.

"You value that throwing arm, Mateland, I suggest you fucking remove it right now."

Craig Mateland. Star-fucking-Quarterback, about to get well and fucking acquainted with my fists. There was already bad blood between us. This topped it. He smirked, his head tilting to look down at Riley. I inhaled deeply through flared nostrils, my hands itching to pluck his fucking eyes from the sockets. Riley pushed up unsteadily, her skin-tight dress riding high on her thighs and her arms flailing for purchase as she wobbled on the skyscraper heels she'd worn to a damn field. I immediately lunged forward to catch her, as did Liss, but it was me her sharpened gaze snapped to, unfocused but aflame with anger and hurt. Her palm shot out, holding me off.

"I don't need your help, Maddox. As you can see..." She waved her arm around clumsily, hitting herself in the eye. "I have new friends now." My throat worked as I fought to control the effect her words had on me. "The kind that aren't afraid to talk to me."

Her words slurred, and that fact provided me with something else to focus on, something besides the evidence of how much I'd hurt her. My thoughts turned murderous, furious gaze slicing back to Mateland. "Did you fucking give her something?"

His lips kicked up as he got to his feet and raised both hands. I took a step forward, the veins in my neck bulging, and grabbed his shirt in my fist, twisting and tugging until we were nose to nose.

"Easy," he said, laughing, full of bravado surrounded by his boys. "She came to us like that."

Teeth bared, I sneered down at him. "The fuck. She. Did."

Eyes swaying back to me, he shrugged like he didn't give a fuck. "No need to drug a bitch when they show up begging for it, is there?"

My fist connected with his right eye. Three of his teammates jumped up, and then all hell broke loose. Le tackled one of them. Mateland rebounded and landed a blow to my stomach, doubling me over, and the other two fell on my back, taking me down to the ground. Riley screamed. Through

a set of legs, I saw her lunge forward, collapsing to her knees in the mud as Liss grabbed her from behind and tried hauling her away. Reaching back with an elbow, I launched it up with force until it connected with something that felt like a jaw. A body fell away followed by a groan. Le straddled someone on the ground, raining punches on their face. Feet came running. A boot connected with my kidney and I grimaced, sucking in a lungful of air, eyes still seeking Riley. I saw Mack racing for us, with Danny and Jason following behind. He got to Riley first, his brawny arms circling her and carting her away, passing her off to Jason as he yelled instructions. A fist made contact with the side of my face, sending my head spinning. My vision danced but my eyes held fast to Riley as Liss and Jason dragged her, kicking and screaming, from the field, her

tear-streaked face straining back to me. Blows landed on me, head, back, sides. I could take a punch. And I needed Riley away before I could get in the game. Leon grappled with some big ugly bastard. Mack faced off against two guys, Danny another two, and then they were all throwing fists. These fuckers, though, had no idea what a real fight was.

I felt a blow to my jaw and shook my head, smiling as I spat blood on the ground. Pushing up a little, I shifted my lower leg and struck out hard, heel connecting with Mateland's ankle. He screamed and released me to clutch at his foot. Maneuvering into a kneeling position, I wrapped an arm around the leg of the second guy and hauled him forward until he was on his back. Sensing Mateland's approach, I swung to my feet, fist already pulled back, and landed a solid blow to his face. His head snapped to the side, blood spraying from his nose. He went down hard, shoulder taking the full force of the impact with a crunch. When I turned around, chest heaving and fists drawn, blood rushed in my ears. Adrenaline had turned to bloodlust. I wanted to maim every single one of these fuckers. But the guy I'd taken down had disappeared. Mateland writhed in the mud, hands covering his face, and the rest of these pricks had their hands raised in goddamn surrender. Growling, I bent to Mateland's level, snatching a handful of hair and dragging his battered face toward me. He screeched, his fingers digging into my skin as his body twisted.

"Fucking look at me," I ground out.

Wary eyes lifted to mine. "I didn't touch her, man. She was fucking wasted when I saw her. Nothing to do with us. Her friend showed up right after and stayed with her the whole time, tried to get her to leave. I didn't fucking touch her."

Eyes narrowed to slits, I hauled him closer, until my mouth was at his ear. "Bull. Shit. Your slimy hands were all over her when I walked over here. You ever put your hands on my girl again, I'll rip your fucking arm off. First and last warning. This time, I'll settle for breaking a few fingers."

"What?" he sputtered. Then his head reared back as my heel smashed down onto his hand. He slammed his eyes shut and a cry of agony erupted from his open mouth.

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As we walked off the makeshift battlefield, an image of Riley being carried away from me, crying and screaming, seared itself into my brain, right alongside the image of that asshole's arm around her. That one came with the realization that, if I was serious about letting her go, I'd have to figure out a way to be okay with her being with some other guy. The thought tore a hole straight through my fucking chest. On what fucking planet

would I ever be okay with that? Based on my reaction tonight, it sure as shit wasn't this one.

And I had zero ideas about what the fuck that meant for me. For us.