

Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1) by Danielle Hill

Chapter 31-34

Thirty-One

Riley

My body tensed at the sound of tires grinding over asphalt. I twisted my head to peer through the window. Trepidation hung over me like a black cloud. Reno's furious, blood-stained face emerged from the passenger side door and my heart clenched. Swivelling back to front, my eyes touched briefly on Liss' concerned ones before I let them drop to my lap. They zoned in on my clasped hands, on the mud caked fingers rubbing over each other anxiously.

I'd fucked up.

I'd drank way too much, got talking to a Dalton guy, and saw an opportunity to escape reality for a minute. I'd just wanted a break, from the grief, the sadness, from the constant struggle and hurting, all the things that seemed to be weighing down on me, growing heavier by the day. I'd wanted carefree, easy. I'd wanted to stop feeling like I was butting my head against a brick wall. By the time Craig Mateland had slowed to a crawl and stuck his head out of the driver's side window, whistling low between pursed lips as I made my way to Liss' place on wobbly legs, I'd already had a nice buzz going on. Thanks to the half bottle of my mom's cheap vodka I'd downed while getting dressed. On an empty stomach.

I could try to blame my shitty choices on impaired judgement. But there before me was a guy who had zero problems. Every single thing about him highlighted that fact. His fancy car and preppy clothes, carefree extra white smile and easy laugh. Light, fluffy, flirty. It had drawn me in like a firefly to something bright and shiny. I'd wanted that. For one night. Not him... that. I'd wanted to forget all the crap. He'd offered a ride and reached across to push open the passenger door. Next thing I knew, I'd sank my ass down onto the plush leather of the seat and we'd sped down the highway to the West side of Richmond. Alarm bells had sounded, a whiny little voice had piped up with a warning, trying to ruin my fun. I'd blanked them both, ignored it all. I knew what was goddamn best for me. People kept making decisions about my life without asking me what I wanted. So, I'd taken matters into my own hands.

God knew how many drinks later, edging toward fall down drunk, I'd found my mind consumed by one thing: Reno. My attempt to escape had backfired spectacularly. Thoughts of him had plagued me like a demon. My mind had replayed the way his eyes always darted past mine instead of looking into them now. The way he avoided touching me, sitting too close or even talking to me. How he didn't smile at me anymore. It had

just gone... poof. His smirk. God, even the smirk, the one that used to drive me insane, had vanished. I'd pay anything to see the smirk now. I missed it; I missed him. So damn much my heart felt like it was shrinking, slowly draining of vitality and shrivelling up like a prune inside me.

And then Liss had started blowing up my phone, wondering where the hell I was. I guess I'd answered. And then I guess she'd called Reno, or Leon, or someone. Then, somehow, Reno had appeared, like a figment of my imagination, as if my brain had conjured him up. My tiny deflated heart had inflated so rapidly it had swelled against my rib cage, banging frantically as it soared into overdrive. God, my reaction to seeing him there, like a mirage in the desert. I was fucking elated. Happy enough to burst.

Then I'd remembered. He didn't want me anymore. He didn't want me bulldozing my way into his life, helping him through his grief, supporting him. He wanted me gone. So, there I fucking was. Except, so was he. And Leon. And then...

My eyes squeezed shut against the memory, my dirty fingertips going to my temples and pressing hard, but I saw it all. Reno's body going down, multiple guys beating on him with their fists and feet. Biting my lip until I tasted blood, I battled to dispel the images from my head as my pulse thundered under my skin. I couldn't unsee it. I couldn't stop seeing it. I already knew he was okay, but he could have been seriously hurt. And Leon, Mack, and Danny. That was on me. My poor choices, my selfishness, my goddamned self-pity.

God! What the fuck had I hoped to achieve?

The door to Leon's trailer squeaked on its hinges. Dropping my hands from the sides of my head without looking up, I inhaled uneasily, my throat rough and swollen. The result of a combination of raw emotion and twenty minutes of screaming at Jason to find out if Reno was okay on the drive back.

"Nice to see you're all in one piece." That was Liss. Standing by the counter diagonally opposite my position on the couch.

Leon moved through the door, then Reno. I could hear the others outside, what sounded like a short boom of laughter erupted, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. They all sounded fine. That didn't assuage my guilt.

"Aww see, I knew you cared. It's just so damn hard to tell when you keep it buried right down under that stinking attitude of yours."

Liss scoffed. "Let me rephrase then, nice to see you're all in one piece... except for you, Leon. You could stand to take a few hard hits to the head, couldn't hurt anything up there, might even fix some stuff. And you know," she mused, finger tapping her chin, her gaze narrowed accusingly, "the rest of these guys look like they actually took part, got

their hands dirty, yet you're looking remarkably unscathed. What did you do... hide behind them?"

Leon tutted. "You know I could walk onto Daltons' field blindfolded with one arm tied behind my back, and still hand every one of those fucking boat-shoe-wearing motherfuckers their asses."

"Wow. Do you hear yourself when you say this shit? Does it sound different in your head? Like what is it you're hearing in that tiny little brain? Does it sound all gangsta or something? Because that shit really doesn't suit you."

Leon's head tilted, hands on his hips. "Underestimate me at your peril, Alissa."

"My peril? What even is that?"

"It means—"

"I know what it means, dipshit. I meant, who says shit like that? You know what, actually? I don't care."

"You say that, but when there's trouble, who do you call?"

"Ghostbusters?" Liss deadpanned.

I felt a smile pull at my lips, then immediately wiped it off my face.

"Oh, she's a fucking comedian now. I ain't buying it, sweetheart. You needed muscle?" I saw him flex exaggeratedly out of the corner of my eye. "You called me. But hey, no worries, I'll keep my gangsta ass out of it next time you wander onto enemy territory drunk off your ass, tryna get yourself fucking gang raped or some shit—"

Leon broke off abruptly and his eyes darted to me. I flinched, feeling the impact of his words. He'd aimed it at Liss, but we all knew why she'd wound up on Baker's field, and it wasn't because she was the idiot in the room. Silence descended like a lead weight.

"I didn't mean it like that, Ri."

I nodded. But

it was what they were all thinking. What we were all thinking. And now I could feel everyone's eyes fixed on me, like a bunch of those little red dots, piercing my skin like lasers. I wanted to apologize, but I felt so embarrassed and remorseful, I could barely find it in me to raise my head. When the combined weight of their stares and the awkward silence became unbearable, my dry lips parted to speak. Someone beat me to it.

“Give us a minute.”

Reno’s voice had the unique ability to simultaneously soothe and stimulate me in equal measures. I couldn’t explain it. There were the times it thrilled me, aroused me, excited me, then there were the times it pissed me off, irritated and angered me. But no matter what, just hearing the deep timbre of it, that husky and familiar baritone, knowing that he was there, flushed my body with a comforting warmth regardless of what was coming out of his mouth. And now, even knowing how badly I’d screwed up, knowing how supremely pissed he was, knowing I owed him an explanation I didn’t really understand or want to voice out loud, I felt that comfort rush through me as his words carried through the compact space.

“That okay with you, Ri?” Liss asked.

Glancing up through my lashes, I nodded my head. With a sigh, she came to stand by me, unfolded her arms and wrapped them around my shoulders.

“Listen,” she spoke quietly, “you feel like shit. I know that, but cut yourself some slack.” Her grip tightened when I pulled away, her head easing back so our eyes met for a beat before hers flicked across to where Reno and Leon hovered just inside the door. When her gaze came back to me, her voice rose, and I knew it was for their benefit. “You got wasted, made a crappy decision, and you know it. But big deal. We’ve all been there. And it’s not like you asked me to get myself involved, or Deontay Wilder over there to come running in throwing fists. We did what we did because we care, and you’d do the same if the situation was reversed. So, yeah, you screwed up, but don’t crucify yourself, Ri... or let anyone else.”

Her words were for me, but her blue gaze traveled back to the door, carrying a none too subtle warning. With that she marched to the door, Leon hot on her heels. The bickering picked up before they’d stepped outside, her harshly whispered reprimand just loud enough to hear—Christ, you’re a fucking moron—before the door closed.

If the silence was awkward before, it was almost unbearable now. Moments passed, neither of us speaking or moving. I didn’t know if he was waiting for me, if I was waiting for him, or if neither of us knew where the hell to begin. Swallowing hard, I peered up at him. He resembled carved granite, tense body, clenched jaw, hands like stones by his sides. His crumpled clothes were mud-stained and streaks of dried blood painted his skin. I noticed a bruise forming on his jaw.

“Ren,” I rasped, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know Liss would call you. I never would have—”

His head snapped to mine, and I quit talking instantly, taken aback by the intensity darkening his eyes until they were nearly black. He literally bristled with rage. The boy was livid.

“Did they do anything to you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I hadn’t been there long before Liss arrived. I was drunk, and stupid...” I answered, my voice trailing off as his gaze somehow darkened even further.

He bit out a curse, dropping his hands to his hips. His body pulsed with anger as he stared right into me. “What the fuck were you thinking?” he demanded, voice hard.

I lowered my gaze and whispered quietly, “I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking.” I’d been trying to avoid thinking.

He exhaled roughly. “Was this about last week? Were you planning to fuck one of them to get back at me?”

Almost immediately the words left his mouth, the guilt and humiliation receded, replaced by a hot wave of anger.

My chin lifted. “Why would I bother? Why would I even think it would matter to you? You don’t care about me, right? You want me to stay out of your life.” I broke off, agitated, rising from the sofa to stand against the kitchen counter, my arms lifting at my sides. “Why did you even go there, huh? What do you care if I fuck every single one of the—”

He didn’t let me finish. His furious face was inches from mine before I could blink. His big body loomed over me, pressing my lower back into the counter. “They could have fucking raped you, Riley. Do you fucking understand that?” he grated.

He looked to be on the verge of losing his shit. He didn’t scare me. I knew he’d never hurt me... physically, at least. Leon’s trailer might suffer some damage if I didn’t get him to calm down, though. Yet... I had finally provoked a reaction. Maybe I wanted him to explode.

I swallowed roughly, my clammy fingers slipping on the smooth surface behind me as my heart threatened to escape its confines. I didn’t know where the words came from, but I kept my head up and held his stare. “Only if I wasn’t willing, right?”

His head flung back like I’d struck him, his expression bordering on homicidal as his breaths heaved in and out. He was barely holding himself in check. Through gritted teeth, his jaw ticking like crazy, he said, “So that’s what you wanted tonight? That’s why you went there... to fuck one of them?”

His anger had been front and center, eclipsing everything else, from the moment he’d stepped through the doorway. But I recognized the emotion blazing in his eyes right

then. Jealousy. My brows pinched as understanding dawned. He wasn't mad I'd dragged him in to a fight; he was mad I might have had sex with someone else. He'd basically demanded I stay out of his life, but the thought I might move on pissed him off? Shaking my head, I narrowed my gaze on him.

"You don't want me anymore... but you don't want anyone else to have me? Is that how this works?"

His head tipped up and his jaw pulled taut. "I never said that."

Mirroring his position, I asked, "Which part?"

His conflicted gaze held mine. Whatever was going on in his head, it was clear he was being pulled in two different directions. Breaking away, he let out a string of curses, dropping his head and planting his clasped hands atop it as he took a measured step back from me. My lungs hastily expelled the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, and my fingers slid from the counter. The fight drained from me.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected, if anything at all. I didn't know if I had deliberately antagonized him, or if I'd simply lost control of my emotions. All I knew was a wasteland yawned between us. All of this space that was quickly filling with things we had and hadn't said to each other. Obstacles piling up that I couldn't see how to navigate my way through. The hope I'd been holding onto was fading. I couldn't get through to him if he was throwing up walls faster than I could tear them down.

My eyes burned, my chest ached. Head low, I murmured dejectedly, "Look, I'm sorry. This wasn't to get at you; I never meant for you to get involved." My voice caught, a single tear escaped, and I hastily swiped a hand over my cheek to brush all evidence of it away. I stepped around him. "I have to go."

His arm shot out before I could make good on my words, his hand wrapping firmly around my wrist.

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"The first part." It was as if someone had ripped the gritted admission from him against his will.

I halted, my gaze trained on my bare toes. My discarded shoes lay in a heap somewhere over by the couch. "What?"

"I've never once said I didn't want you."

His touch burned. His words burned. His eyes, which I could feel boring into the side of my head, burned a hole right through me. He fucking set me on fire. I wasn't sure he'd hear me, I could hardly hear myself over the sound of hot blood coursing through my ears. "And the second part?"

His fingers tightened painfully. I heard his slow intake of breath as he deliberately relaxed his fingers on my wrist, flexing them while his thumb shifted to draw circles lazily against my skin, like he was trying to distract himself from the thoughts my words had induced.

Taking a breath of my own, I forged on, my voice a breathy whisper, ?

?You want someone else to have me?"

He stilled completely. My eyes traveled the length of his body as I turned to look at him, my fragile heart thundering in my chest as my gaze stopped just short of his shadowed jawline, fear and doubt halting my progress.

His voice was so husky and low, it was almost unrecognizable. "What do you want me to say, Riley?"

I lifted my gaze. Our eyes collided and locked. "Just the truth," I breathed, begged.

He lowered his head. "Riley..."

My lids slid shut, heart sinking. He was going to deflect. Again. Just like he couldn't say he didn't love me, but he wouldn't say he did. He was fighting a war, and somehow, I'd become the enemy. Pulling from his grip roughly, I walked to the couch and bent to snag the straps of my shoes with my fingertips.

"Fuuuck!" What sounded like a fist slammed into the wall. I could almost feel his turmoil.

Suddenly he was right behind me, his harsh breaths blowing my hair.

"No. Okay? That what you want to hear?" My heart stopped, my lungs seizing as I straightened, bringing his chest flush with my back. His heat seeped into me and goose bumps erupted over the surface of my skin. "There's your fucking answer."

His breaths became ragged. "Do I want some other guy's hands all over you, touching you, his mouth on you? No. I can't fucking bear the thought of it. Do you have any goddamn idea how hard it was to see that fucker touching you tonight? Do you? You want to fuck someone else, Riley?"

He heaved, his chest expanding heavily against my back.

"You want to know how I feel about that? Some worthless fucking asshole sticking their dick inside you?" His voice bordered on enraged, driven by some unfiltered, untameable emotion he couldn't keep under control. "Not happening, Riley. Never fucking happening. Not while I'm fucking breathing. You know why... because you're fucking mine," he growled, guttural and raw.

He'd splayed himself open by admitting it. I had backed him into a corner, and he'd battled his way out, but it sounded like he'd lost the war. This was no victory cry. And we both knew it. I tasted salt on my lips and my entire body trembled, because I didn't know where that left us.

Turning slowly, I faced him, looking up through blurry eyes. I couldn't disguise my confusion, or how lost I felt in that moment. I also knew he'd see the inkling of hope that I couldn't seem to snuff out, because for every time he fought me and pushed me away, he came back.

"Then what do you want from me?" I whispered.

Head deeply furrowed, his eyes scanned over my face for half a second before he muttered, "Goddammit, Riley."

And then his mouth was on mine.

Thirty-Two

Riley

My head was still spinning from the events of the weekend. From whatever Reno's goddammit, Riley and that bruising kiss might have meant. I obviously wouldn't know since he didn't stick around long enough to enlighten me. Forty-eight hours and change was not long enough to figure out what it was exactly that Reno wanted from me. Not sure I'd figure it out given forty-eight years. I questioned whether he even knew.

Distracted, I shouldered my way into fourth period U.S. Government, keeping my face averted because I was tardy and naively hoping Mr. Stenson would cut me some slack if I didn't look directly at him. Not a chance.

"How nice of you to join us, Miss Mason. Class is almost over; I wonder why you bothered."

Man, he was an ass. Averting my face to hide my eye roll, I muttered a lackluster apology and hauled my persistently preoccupied self to the desk I usually sat in at the back of the class. Glancing to the last cuckoo clock in existence hanging on the far wall, I noted I was four minutes late. Drama Queen. It took some effort to resist coughing out my newly formed opinion of Stenson under my breath. Approaching my desk with my head down, and far less haste than I should have, given the circumstances, I finally

glanced up... and my heart slammed into my rib cage. My brows hiked to my hairline and my sneakers squeaked loudly on the linoleum as I ground to a halt.

Reno.

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In my class. Again. Sitting at the desk right by mine. My reaction might have been comical: saucer wide eyes, mouth gaping like a fish, frozen in place. Except every eye in the room now focused on me, awaiting a reaction, and every set of flapping lips murmured under cupped hands.

An exaggerated tut sounded from the front. “Miss Mason? Are you determined to disrupt the entire lesson? Take a seat. Now.”

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I swallowed hard and took the final three steps necessary to reach my desk. Reno didn’t look up, nor did he attempt to speak to me after I took my seat. I heard not one thing Mr. Stenson droned on about, instead I spent the duration of the lesson stealing discreet glances at Reno every few seconds. Okay, every other second. So, I had thought I was being discreet. As usual, I was wrong.

In one of the brief interludes between my staring sessions, a small wadded up ball of paper smacked the side of my face. Frowning, I palmed it, bringing it quickly onto my lap under the desk to open. And then I sucked in a breath, my cheeks heating. My eyes slid closed with embarrassment and my teeth clamped together. I refused to look at him. For a whole thirty seconds. Then I folded. Crossing my arms over each other on the desk, I dropped my head forward and turned to find eyes like melted chocolate honed in on me. But that wasn’t why my breath caught in my throat or why my pulse kicked up a notch... or ten. He was smirking. A half smirk, lacking some of his normal cockiness and vitality for sure, but it was there. My neck snapped back around. What the hell was going on? My fingers crushed the crumpled paper in my palm like it was a stress ball. I might not have a clue what was happening, but I knew that I wanted to wring his thick neck.

I jumped to my feet the second the bell rang, hastily stuffing my crap into my backpack, intent on making a speedy getaway. I didn’t think I was ready for... whatever this was. I had emotional whiplash from this guy. He couldn’t order me out of his life one minute, then kiss me and disappear on me the next, and then throw notes at my face and goddamn smirk at me. All with no explanation. He couldn’t because I didn’t know what

the hell to do with that. My phone vibrated in my hand, drawing my gaze as I paced down the hall.

Liss: Running late. Prickman the douche is having his daily fucking meltdown! Get my usual pleeeeeeease...

Mr. Pickman, universally known amongst the students as Prickman, was an adult-sized toddler. He'd throw a massive tantrum and hold the entire class hostage if some dickwad forgot their homework or undermined his authority. Which everyone did, all the time, because while it was irritating being held back, it was damn entertaining watching his pointed little ears turn red and spit balls shoot from his mouth. Attention diverted, my fingers tapping out a quick response, I wasn't prepared to react when a hand gripped my elbow from behind, smoothly steering me from the stream of bodies and through a set of doors toward the stairwell. Hard body pressed to my side, Reno bent so his lips brushed my ear and his warm breath misted over my skin. I fought to control the tremor that shot through my body.

"We need to talk."

He tucked me into an alcove under the stairs, releasing his hold on my arm and positioning himself opposite me with a chunk of distance between us. I sank back into the wall, needing its solid form for support. My mind was a hive of activity—feelings, thoughts and decisions buzzing around up there, butting into one another. I couldn't decide what I was toward him in this moment. Part of me resented the way he'd treated me, and yet, I could understand his behavior. He'd hurt me, but he had his reasons. I sympathized with every one of them, but I wasn't sure my heart could take any more of this hot and cold. I sighed, my lips pursing. I loved him. That's what I felt. So I stood. And I waited.

His expression was slightly closed off, gaze roaming idly over the contours of my face, but it was softer, less guarded, than I'd seen it in a long while. Dragging it up to my eyes, he pocketed his hands.

"I've been doing some thinking the past few days," he started, watching for my reaction. I didn't know how to react, not yet. "I owe you an apology." And there it was. My shock must have registered on my face because his chin dropped to his chest and he inhaled heavily, his face a mask of contrition. "I took shit out on you. You didn't deserve that."

My chest constricted. He took a step closer.

"I get why," I croaked. Damn tears pricked at my eyes and my stupid throat swelled with emotion. Man, I was a wreck these days. I'd never cried so much in my life. I steeled my spine against the wall at my back, refusing to break down. My breath held as he inched forward.

He moved until the toes of his sneakers kissed mine. My neck craned to look up at him. Resting his forearm on the wall, he leaned over me, his warmth and smell invading my senses, making it difficult to think. His features were half in shadow, but there was a tenderness in his eyes that wove around my heart as he continued to stare silently down at me. My breath shuddered under his quiet scrutiny.

I blinked, swallowing. "You didn't answer my question the other night," I whispered, finding my voice, my heart fluttering behind my ribs like a bird's wings.

"I know," he murmured softly, never taking his eyes from mine.

"Are you going to?"

His fingers drifted toward my face, the backs of them tracing the side of my cheek. "What if I don't have an answer?" I shifted my head to the side, breaking the contact, leaving his fingers hovering an inch from my skin. His eyes sought mine, narrowing in resignation. "Not good enough, huh?"

I couldn't do this again... go round in circles. I loved him, I did, and I wanted to support him, but not as his emotional punching bag. I needed him to let me in, even a little.

"Give me something, Ren. Anything."

Fear flared in his eyes, clear as day, and it struck me straight through the chest. He sighed, his hand coming

back to my face. I didn't bother moving this time.

"What do I want from you?" He repeated my question from Friday night softly. I pulled my bottom lip in between my teeth. His head swayed from side to side a couple of times. "I miss you. Spending time with you, sparring with you. More than anything, Ri, I just fucking miss you."

"But...?" I sensed it. I knew there was one.

His brow furrowed. "I can't give you what I was offering before." Palms flattening against the wall on either side of me, he lowered his head. I pressed my lips together, sucking in a breath. His nearness, like this, was overwhelming. "But I can't keep you at arm's length anymore either."

"What are you saying, Ren?"

His stare was intense, tone gruff, but there was vulnerability there. This wasn't easy for him, and my heart ached with the need to comfort him. "I need you in my life."

“Okay.” Agreement. Just like that. Air burst from my lungs in relief. He’d offered me a doorway back into his life. It was all I’d been asking for. I could work with that.

His brow pinched, muted surprise settling over his features. “I don’t even know what I’m asking you for.”

I bit my lip to stop it curving into a smile. “I know.”

His eyebrows came together in question.

I shrugged, expelling a long breath before admitting, “I want to be in your life. We’ll figure out the rest.” Maybe it should have worried me that I’d take him anyway I could get him, but the feeling of contentment seeping through me swept away any concern.

His eyes hooded, concealing his emotions, and he lowered his head. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and he cleared his throat roughly before dipping his head in a curt nod. “Thank you.”

I reciprocated the gesture, inclining my head. He backed up and extended his arm, hand out. My gaze fell to his outstretched hand and my lips twitched. I placed my palm in his and his strong fingers closed around it. Electricity danced between us. I had to fight a gasp.

One thick brow arched, lips hitching up on one side. “Friends?”

I grinned, shaking my head lightly as the warmth of his hand cocooned mine. “Sure.”

We separated slowly, but our gazes held. Reaching into my pocket, I snagged the crumpled piece of paper. Closing my fist around it, I tossed it straight at his face. He caught it mid-air, some crazy cat like reflexes at play there, and brought his puzzled gaze to mine. I raised my brows, silently communicating with him to open it. His eyes lowered as he pulled it open. On the side facing me was his messy scrawl from earlier:

Clearly spent too much time looking at my dick lately if you need to stare that hard to remind yourself what my face looks like.

His lips formed the most beautiful smirk as he read my response. When his eyes met mine, I saw some of my Reno in there. That playful, arrogant guy I loved to hate, but loved to love even more. Lifting from the wall, I strode past him with a wink. Holding the door open, I stopped to glance over my shoulder before walking through. He stared after me, his gaze burning as it locked onto mine. “Don’t worry, Ri. I’ll make sure I stick around long enough that you get a real good look next time.”

My breath hitched, catching in my throat. I spun away. My teeth dragged over my bottom lip, caging my smile. Friends. Weren't supposed to look at each other's... bits. I blew a stream of air out through my lips. God only knew what I'd gotten myself into, but my steps were lighter than they'd been in a long time. I almost floated down the hall.

Thirty-Three

Riley

"Why Reno?" I asked, as I sat cross-legged on his couch.

"What?"

"Reno? Why does everyone call you Reno now? I don't remember where the o came from. It was Renner or Madd when I first moved here. I remember that because I thought it suited you."

He raised his brows, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Which?"

I grinned, twisting my hair into a messy bun and threading my pen through it to keep it in place. "The latter. You'd have been so much cuter as a kid if you weren't constantly scowling."

His lips curved into a smirk. "That right?" I tipped a shoulder, a smile playing over my mouth. "I still scowl all the time now, and we all know how hot you are for me."

My face heated, instantly verifying his claim. He leaned forward on one elbow, chuckling as his pen lid pressed softly into my warm flesh.

"You blush so easily, Ri. So fucking adorable..." his voice trailed off. Our gazes clashed. All traces of humor vanished.

Feeling my heartbeat speed up, I backed away from him, squeezing into my corner as I tucked a section of loose hair behind my ear and averted my gaze. Moments like this reminded me we were undefined. He'd offered me friendship, and we were nailing that part of our arrangement, hence the current study session in his trailer, but he'd sort of also offered to show me his penis at the same time. And that was where it got complicated. Being just friends was a damn minefield. Every inadvertent touch sent electricity shooting through me. Every heated glance, or reference to anything even remotely sexual, resulted in this charged tension that neither one of us knew how to deal with. Eventually someone would change the subject to the weather, or school, or something equally mundane, and we'd carry on like there hadn't been an entire minute where we'd imagined tearing off each other's clothes.

Yeah, it was great.

Ren cleared his throat. "So, Reno, huh? You wanna know where it came from, right?" His rushed words brought a grin to my lips. I liked seeing him flustered. I nodded, chewing my thumbnail. "I got into it with some shithead from Dalton." He broke off abruptly, hitting me with a stern glare.

That was still a sore subject. I rolled my eyes and mouthed let it go.

"So yeah, some prick from Dalton. I'm sure you know him," he muttered sarcastically.

My brows lifted. "Really? We're going there again?"

He shrugged. "It was damn irresponsible, Riley."

"So, you've said. Please continue."

"Anyway, this guy's ugly. Like fucking ass ugly. I beat on him a bit and he went down faster than a hooker's panties."

"Erm... eugh."

"Don't act like a prude, Ri. We both know you're not."

My mind immediately went to all the non-prudish things he'd done to me—all the non-prudish things I still wanted him to do to me—and my breathing grew shallow. I turned my gaze to Reno. Hunger burned in his eyes and his nostrils flared. His thoughts had gone in the same direction as mine. And there came the sexual tension again.

"The damn story, Ren!" I all but yelled, as my head launched a slew of x-rated images at me.

"Fuck. Right." He gave his head a firm shake. "Yeah. He's ass ugly, I kick the shit out of him. The guys are spewing some shit about how I rearranged his face, and then someone pipes up with how I improved it. Next thing, I've renovated it. Renner, Reno. You get it. It's dumb as fuck, but it stuck."

His words came so fast, I could barely keep up. I'd lost interest in the topic, anyway. We were both breathing heavily by the time he finished, and our heated gazes locked. Reno's burned like hot coals.

"The fuck are we doing, Ri?"

Practically panting, I shook my head. "Being friends?"

“Screw this.”

We both lunged. My hands clutched his hair, his fingers tunnelled through mine, knocking the pen loose and sending it cascading over my shoulder as our mouths fastened together. It was frantic, our movements desperate. Rising to our knees, our bodies aligned. My breasts crushed against his chest, where his heart raced like a train, matching mine beat for beat.

“Fuck, Riley,” he groaned against my lips.

I nodded frantically. “I know,” I gasped. My hips arched into him, needing to be closer. His hands dropped to cup my ass, pulling me in. A moan tore from my lips. “We shouldn’t.”

It was the weakest protest ever uttered.

/> “I know,” he agreed. But his grip tightened, tongue plunging between my lips while a hand grasped my thigh, lifting to curl it around his hip. The angle positioned him right where I needed him most and my head fell back on my shoulders, heat flooding my core. “That good, baby?” he murmured.

Eyes squeezed shut, my head bobbed wildly. “Uh-huh.”

“Yeah?” Hand splaying over my butt cheek, he thrust against me. Lids half mast, I gazed up at him. The fire in his eyes could have set me alight. His lips captured mine with a ferocity that was mind blowing. My bones went limp as I sagged into his hard body, all control gone.

My back hit the cushions, Reno’s lips stayed on mine as he sank between my thighs, still holding my leg up around his waist. His free hand found the hem of my shirt, swiping it up to reveal my bra. He hastily tugged it down, freeing a breast and closing his palm around it while his hips ground into me. I was delirious, head rolling, sensation building like a storm. God, I needed to feel him. My fingers roamed his back, grasping handfuls of fabric and tearing at it. Reno broke the kiss, reaching above his head to pull his shirt off, then did the same with mine.

Without stopping to process my actions, I reached down. My fingers fumbled with the buttons on his jeans, roughly jerking them over his ass. Reno dipped to catch my lips again. Our mouths opened as we breathed into each other, our eager hands working to remove our clothes. Raised on my elbows, I kicked at the black fabric caught around my ankles, trying to free my legs. On his knees, Reno reached behind to snag the material and pull it from me, throwing it aside. Bending over me, he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my panties and peeled them down over my thighs, before sinking a finger into me. My sigh was sheer exhilaration and relief.

He eased back, his black, hooded gaze locked onto where his finger slid slowly in and out of me.

“Ren,” I whimpered, head thrashing on the pillow.

“I got you, baby,” he murmured as he sank a second finger inside, his thumb pressing against my clit. The combination was enough to send me hurtling into oblivion. Stars danced behind my eyes and my fingers raked over his skin as my body rode the wave of ecstasy. He didn’t give me any time to recover. Pulling out his fingers and rolling on a condom, he settled between my legs and pushed into me in one smooth thrust before I’d finished coming down.

He rose over me, his hands locking onto both of mine and holding them captive high above my head. My spine arched, pushing my breasts out. His head lowered, catching a nipple between his teeth. The slight pinch sent a jolt of pleasure directly to my center, making me gasp and my thighs clench around Reno’s hips. It was overload. I could already feel another orgasm building as he slid in and out of my body, his pace increasing, pelvis slamming into mine roughly. The contact created a delicious friction that heightened with every thrust. My nipple popped out of his mouth as he lifted his head.

“Look at me, Ri,” he grunted.

My eyes drifted open, lids hung low, and our gazes connected. His brimmed with an intensity so fierce, so unbearably raw, I had to fight the urge to look away. As we stared into each other, his movements grew frenzied, his brow creasing and his chest straining, and then we both went spiralling over the edge.

His weight landed on top of me, clammy hands cradling my head as his face sank into the cushion. Wrapping my arms around his back, I trailed my fingers over his skin as my lungs worked double time to suck in vital oxygen. The feel of his heart racing against mine was probably one of the best feelings in the world. But worry crept in, and tension seeped into my muscles, swiftly replacing the euphoria. Based on the previous two encounters, I’d be stupid not to expect another disappearing act. Slamming my eyes closed, I mentally chastised myself. We’d just got back to a level footing. This could easily send him into another tailspin. How the hell could I let this happen?

“Don’t.” His head rose and he lifted until his face hovered several inches above mine. I quickly turned my head to the side, noting how the muscles in his arms flexed by my head. “Don’t overthink it.”

Tension clung to me and apprehension pressed down on my chest. “We shouldn’t have done that,” I blurted.

“Probably not,” he said, but there was amusement in his tone. It threw me.

"It could ruin everything," I clarified. Why wasn't he running for the hills?

"It could."

My frustration built. I wanted to see his reaction, but I couldn't seem to make myself look at him. "Well... has it?" I demanded, huffing out a breath.

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Lowering himself down onto his forearms, he brought his nose to my cheek, rubbing it over my skin before his fingers lifted to brush sweaty strands of hair from my forehead. "No," he said softly.

A breath of relief escaped, and I shuttered my gaze. Even without looking into my eyes, I knew he'd see too much if I didn't control my reactions. Sex might be permissible in this new friendship arrangement. I doubted love was. Not right now, anyway. And right at this minute, my feelings for him had my chest in a vice grip.

"Um... good. Great"

"Riley?" he murmured.

"Yep?"

"You going to look at me?"

"Erm... no."

He laughed, the sound low and throaty. And fucking delicious. "No?"

I shook my head in response, my lips firmly pressed together, eyes still shut tight.

"You know, I'm still inside you, it's a little late to go all shy on me now." His words sent a bolt of heat right through me. My entire body tensed, clenching around him.

"I felt that," he said, tone gruff. And I felt my cheeks flame, the tone of his voice doing nothing to ease the ache building inside of me. A low chortle left his mouth. "So fucking adorable," he murmured, repeating his words from earlier, and I turned to mush. Dropping a kiss onto the end of my nose, he pulled from me and hopped to his feet.

This felt like more than friends. More than friends with benefits even. I was too afraid to ask him what it was, though. So, I kept my cheek pressed into the cushion and my hand flattened against my heart, trying with all my might to hold it there because it felt like if I lifted my palm, it might burst out of my chest and fly to Reno. And he'd probably smack it away with a baseball bat.

That's not what he wants from us. But like an innocent puppy, my heart acted on feeling, not reason. Especially not when he emerged from the bathroom, naked as the day he was born, and reached up to hook his fingers over the door frame, muscles flexing and a playful glint in his eye. My eyes shot wide, unbridled lust coursing through me.

"This is what you wanted, right, Ri?"

I gulped as my eyes tracked every ripped inch of him.

"What was it your note said? Something like: Hardly... you never stick around long enough for me to get a proper look at your dick?"

Burning. My face was burning.

"Well, here it is, baby. Don't ever accuse me of not following through on a promise."

I cleared my throat, nodding. "Well, uh, thanks... for that," I choked.

"Riley?"

I nodded again, dragging my eyes up to his. That damn smirk. Had I said I would pay to see that? I ground my teeth and grated, "What?"

"I'll be sticking around this time."

I melted. Like an ice cream cone on a scorching summer day. He approached me quietly, a look of determination on his face. Until it disappeared between my legs, and then I must have blacked out.

"So... somebody spotted you doing the walk of shame from Reno's trailer in the middle of the night, Wiley Riley."

"What?" I whisper-yelled down the line. "Who?"

"Leon. He stalks your place with binoculars and a bottle of lube every night. Didn't you know?"

"Alissa!" I said, exasperated. "Do not make me full name you..."

Her sharp intake of breath sounded in my ear. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would. It's literally on the tip of my tongue. Now, what the hell?"

"Fine," she huffed. "Leon doesn't sit outside your place stroking one out while watching you get changed for bed. It wouldn't shock me if he did though, just FYI."

"Liss!" I growled.

"Okay, okay. Christ! Chill. Anyway, Leon rocked up at his place stoned last night, his mom smelled it on him, and he found himself ban-ish-ed. Fucking Romeo slash Leo style. Fuck, I love that movie. Anyway... blah, blah, blah, every asshole he knows is either hammered or ignoring their cell—that's you, in case you didn't realize—so he calls me to give him a ride to his trailer, because people seem to be under the mistaken impression that I'm happy to provide chauffeur services in the middle of the damn night. I'm not, by the way. Then he texts me a half hour later saying one Riley Mason just snuck out of Ren's place and hot-footed it across the trailer park."

"I didn't sneak." I totally snuck. "I opened the door and left." While Reno was still sleeping.

"Uh-huh," she mused. "And what were you doing at Reno's at that hour, my sweet?"

"Uh... studying?" It came out a squeak. And a question. And I was totally incriminating myself.

"Studying? Studying what... his anatomy?" Liss quipped. My eyes slid closed.

"No! Yes," I conceded, fingers picking at my comforter. "But there was real studying going on, too."

"Yeah, I'll bet. You two are gonna ace biology with all this studying you've been doing."

"Hey, that's the first time we've... studied in that way since... you know. And we were working on an assignment for Government. It was totally legit. Also, I'm not even taking biology this year," I tacked on, like a five-year-old.

"Shame. Seems like you're gonna fail every other class this year. Would have been nice to know at least one would be

a shoo-in."

"You're a huge dick," I muttered.

"Oh, you know what? You never told me... is it big?"

I hung my head. "I'm hanging up, now."

Laughter boomed from her side. "Hey, before you go..."

"Is it about Reno's dick?"

"Nope."

"Then go ahead."

"In all seriousness, babe, is this a thing, like are you two back on or... what?" Serious Liss asked questions I'd asked myself all night and couldn't answer. Serious Liss made me question exactly what the hell I was doing and what the eventual consequences would be. And there would be consequences.

"It's—" I broke off, nibbling my lip. Deep down, I might already know the answer. I also knew I wouldn't admit it, not to Liss and definitely not to myself. "It's... friendship. Ish."

"Ri—" she began. I cut her off. I had to.

"I know, I know... I'm... being careful."

"Well, I hope you're protecting yourself from more than just baby Rinos and genital herpes."

"Oh my God! I can't believe you just said that!" I muttered into the phone.

She giggled. "But they'd be damn cute Rinos"

"I meant the goddamn herpes, Liss!"

"I know." She laughed, before the sound faded a little. "And I meant your heart, babe."

I sighed, the organ in question squeezing in my chest. "I know."

And God, did I know.

Thirty-Four

Riley

"Oh my god! You got in?"

My body lifted a clear foot off the ground as my mom's head appeared over my shoulder, her excited shriek piercing my ear.

"Jesus, Mom!" I shouted, breathlessly, as my heart lodged somewhere in my throat. I spun to face her. "You're like a goddamn stealth ninja! Where the fu-flip did you come from?" I was never sure why I tried to avoid cursing in front of my mom. Given the stuff that had spewed out of her mouth over the years, my reserve seemed almost ridiculous. Yet, I always corrected myself. Go figure.

Her shoulders wiggled a little, a bright smile stretched her face. "From Marshall's place."

"And Marshall is..." I asked, then slammed my mouth shut too late, internally cursing myself. When would I learn? Do not incite conversations with Mom about guys!

Her eyes glazed as she reached down to swipe off her heels, tossing them aside before falling back onto the couch in a dreamlike state.

"He's a dreamboat, hon." Bliss coated her words. "I went there straight from work, been there all morning. You got my text, right?" she asked, wide eyed, like she was about to get in trouble, like I was the parent here. I rolled my eyes but nodded yes. "Great. Anyway, my God, he's insatiable!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose between my finger and thumb and muttered, "Jesus."

"He's the new bartender at the club. Ah, the things that man can do with his hands. You know, I've always said you can tell a lot about a man by looking at his hands, haven't I said that, Riley?" She looked at me expectantly. I just blinked back at her. That didn't deter her, though. "And this guy, wow, I just knew. When I was watching him rub down those glasses, I knew. I said to myself, I need those hands on me."

"O-kay." I ambled backward, edging away from whatever direction this conversation was heading in. "Always fun sharing, but I think I've heard as much as I want to for today, so I'm gonna..." I hooked a thumb over my right shoulder.

A tinkle of laughter burst from my mom. "Sweets, I bet you're appreciating how honest and open I've always been with you about these things over the years, you know, now that you and Maddox are—"

"Christ, Mom." I threw my hand up. "That's... that's not how these... discussions go. You talk, it's majorly inappropriate, I pretend to listen but really, I'm singing that la la la song in my head, and then I go bleach out my brain and pretend like it never happened. We don't—" I spread my arms out, searching for the right word, "... reciprocate."

Jumping to her knees on the lumpy sofa, she clapped her hands together. "But now we can! Now we can share stories!"

"Oh my god, why? Why would we do that?" I asked, face incredulous. This woman!

Her lips pursed. "Hon, I know you and Maddox are having sex. And that's great. As long as you're old enough, being careful, and its consensual, sex is the most wonderful way to express your feelings for one another."

My mouth fell open. What an absolute hippie: free love and weed. "Why would you know I'm having sex? If I even am!" I hastily added.

"A mother knows these things." My eyebrow lifted, arms fitting tight across my chest. She rolled her eyes. "Fine, I saw you sneaking out of his trailer a couple of weeks ago. I was sharing a joint with Kayleigh after she dropped me home when I saw you creeping back here."

Striving for patience, I inhaled through my nose, my lids sliding closed as I muttered under my breath, "Was there anyone who didn't see me leaving his damn place?"

"What, hon?"

I blinked my eyes open. "Nothing. Look, I really gotta go get dressed. Liss will be here any second. I've done all the laundry and emptied the trash."

"Hey, wait." She shot forward, her slim fingers circling my forearm. "You got in?" Her smooth forehead tipped to the letter in my hand.

I cast my eyes down. My fingers tightened around the slips of paper before I tugged them behind my back, like I could pretend they didn't exist if we couldn't see them. "Oh, um, yeah. I guess. "

Her brow crinkled a little. "That's what you wanted, right? That's fantastic."

I shrugged, looking away. "I guess. I'm, uh, I'm still... undecided."

"Undecided?" she asked, eyes assessing me, head tipped to the side. "Ri, is something wrong?"

"No. Uh, nothing," I lied. Something was wrong. I didn't want to leave him.

Reno had never planned to go to college, even before Brett and Owen died. He was great with cars and had years of experience working at Brett's garage. They'd wanted to expand, had big plans for the place. We hadn't broached the subject recently, but I didn't have to ask to deduce that he wouldn't be coming along with me. And given the fragility of our current situation, a long-distance friendship probably wasn't in the cards

either. This thing between us already felt like trying to hold on to sand, the tiny grains constantly slipping through my fingers. If I left, it would just blow away.

Besides, even if I wanted to leave him, I couldn't do that. It had been less than three months since he'd lost his only family. I couldn't leave him here, all alone. Sure, Leon was staying local, and the Donovans were always around, but they weren't me. He needed me. Right?

My mom's fingers contracted around my arm, snapping me from my thoughts. Her concerned gaze scored my face. "You sure?" she asked again, taking in my tight brow and pinched lips. I nodded and backed away before I did something stupid like cry. "Ri? If it's money, I told you I would help you out. I've been putting some away. For you. For college. So, you don't have to worry if you don't get a job right away. Plus, there's financial aid. You applied for that scholarship, right? We'll make it work, hon."

