

Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1) by Danielle Hill

Chapter 34-40

My lips formed a tender smile. She wasn't always the most responsible, but she had stunned me at the end of last summer when she'd sat me down all mom-like and told me to quit my job at the coffee house in town to focus on my senior year. She said she'd taken on more shifts at the club, and she'd cover everything because she wanted me to reach my full potential. I'd argued, worried about how we'd get by, but she'd assured me she made good money at the club. There'd been an air of determination in her I'd never seen before, so I'd agreed. This time last year, I'd wanted nothing more than to go to college. Not too far away—I wanted to be able to get back within a few hours if Mom ever needed me—but somewhere out of state. Somewhere else.

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Now, I just wanted to be here. For Reno. With Reno. I was that girl, the one who built her life around a guy. But my actions were justifiable because this guy... needed me. Even if he didn't know it.

"Morning, campers!" Liss hollered as she burst through the door. I blinked rapidly, clearing the emotion from my eyes, and turned to face her at the same time my mom did. Mom's face broke into a wide smile as she lurched forward, grabbing Liss in a tight hug.

"Liss!" she screeched. "I haven't seen you in so long!"

Mom and Liss fricking adored each other. My lips molded into a smile. If I didn't know better, I'd swear someone switched Liss and I at birth; she could easily be my mom's daughter.

"It's afternoon, dumbass."

Liss pulled back, frowning at me. "Not to me. I woke up like twenty minutes ago." And yet, here she was, looking like a supermodel in her short shorts and sheer cover up. Not fair. Her eyes scanned over my outfit, baggy sweats and a stained shirt, zero makeup. Laundry chic. Her frown deepened. "You're not even remotely ready."

I threw out an arm. "Blame this dirty stop out, she's been regaling me with tales of Marshall and his magic hands."

Mom grinned. Liss immediately swung back to her, eyes gleaming. "Tell me everything!"

"Mom," I warned, heading for the bathroom, "just remember Liss is still a minor for a couple more weeks. Her parents probably wouldn't approve of that kind of talk."

Liss' head snapped round to toss me a scowl. "You evil little wench."

I raised both palms, giggling. "Lucky for you, that's never stopped her before."

"Hey," Liss began, focus shifting to the letter I hadn't shredded to pieces and set alight yet. I'd received an email before the letter. It sat in my deleted folder. Where no-one could see it. "Is that...?"

"She got in!" Mom squealed. "I never doubted for a second. She skipped kindergarten, you know, Alissa."

I blew out a breath and swiped a hand over my face.

Liss' eyes widened, a wide grin emerging as she nodded. "I do know! Riley... that's amazing!" I lowered my gaze, bringing the letter back behind me, noting her smile slip and brows knit. "It is amazing, right? What's going on? What am I missing?" I could feel her eyes shifting between my mom and me.

"Nothing," I assured her. "It's just... a big decision."

Her eyebrows drew together. "What? Riley... there is no decision. I mean, you already made this decision. Didn't you?" Her head flitted to my mom, who shrugged a little, hands lifting out at her sides. Liss rolled her lips together, schooling her features. "Look, go get dressed before you make us late. We'll talk later. But now, I want to hear all about Marshall and those hands!" She rubbed her hands together.

"You really don't," I muttered, walking through the bathroom door. But not before I heard...

And exactly how old is Marshall, Amy?

A senior in college, he's got stamina for days. The young ones always do.

I palmed my forehead.

My mother, ladies and gentleman.

"What's going on?" Liss asked, eyes ahead.

The breeze tossed her hair around her shoulders as we drove across town. Danny's parents were among the most well off in the town. Not crazy rich or anything, but he had a big house with a small pool. Spring had definitely sprung. It was the hottest day of the year so far. So, pool party.

Diverting my attention out the passenger window, I hooked a finger over the lowered glass and shrugged. "Nothing. I just... haven't decided what I want to do yet."

“Because of Reno.” She knew without me saying a word. So, I said nothing. “Ri—”

“God, I know, Liss,” I said, my tone harsher than I’d intended. My head shook as I pivoted to face her. In a calmer voice, I told her, “I’m thinking maybe I’ll hold off for a couple of years. Then, you know, see how things are. Things should have settled by then. It’s not like I’m not going to school.”

“And is this what he wants?” I detected the doubt in her voice.

I turned my head away from it. Maybe I was being an idiot. Maybe I knew I was. It didn’t change how I felt.

“We haven’t discussed it,” I answered faintly.

“Riley. This is huge. This is your future. You get that, right?”

Swivelling round, I placed my palms on my thighs, rubbing over the bare skin. I wished things were easier. Liss had gotten into South Coral University and would be off to Florida come the fall, no question. But my circumstances were different.

“Things have been so much better between us lately. He’s... he’s doing really good. I mean we’re... things are okay. I feel like we’ve just got back on a level footing and what, then I’m gonna up and leave?”

“It’s still months away,” she pointed out.

Biting my lip, I nodded slowly. “I know.” Eyes meeting hers, I lifted my shoulders helplessly. “I just... can’t leave. Not yet.”

Sadness gleamed in her blue gaze. Reaching out, she covered my hand with one of her own. “Just don’t rule anything out, okay? You’ve got some time before you need to decide. Can you think about it? Can you at least promise me that?”

Squeezing her fingers, I offered her what I hoped was a convincing smile. “Sure.”

She gave a slight nod. “Great. Now let’s get wasted!”

My eyes landed on Reno the second I rounded the house. And the next second, I spotted Raya, prancing around less than three feet away from him. Every curvy inch of her spilled out of the bits of floss she was passing off as a bikini. Her long silky black hair flowed over her tanned skin like a freaking waterfall. I ground my teeth. Damn, the

girl had a rocking body. I hated that. I also hated that I suddenly felt self-conscious and insecure.

In private, Reno and I couldn't keep our hands off each other, but in public, it was another story. I was lucky if he spared me a fleeting glance at school. He never singled me out to speak to me, barely acknowledged my existence. He treated me like anyone else. And I swallowed it down, accepted it as his way of maintaining some distance between us. He still needed to view our arrangement as casual, even if it felt like so much more to me. Even if sometimes, it seemed like he knew it was so much more.

Standing here now though, in what felt like my grandmother's swimsuit with my straight hips and newly acquired b cups, I doubted everything. Every word of reassurance I'd uttered to myself. Every promise we'd work it out. I'd told myself I just had to wait for him to come around, be patient, because he was still grieving and had suffered major emotional trauma. And I'd managed to convince myself he would come around at some point. Watching him laugh with his friends now though, their shaded eyes on the busty bimbos putting on a show, I wasn't so sure anymore. Despite the warm April air and bright rays of sun kissing my pale skin, a chill washed over me, goose bumps breaking out.

Turning, I made a beeline for the kitchen, snatching up a plastic cup and filling it with beer, before throwing the contents down my throat without tasting it. What the hell was I doing? I was offering myself up on a platter every night, and Reno was out there getting free goddamn lap dances. Obviously, I knew he'd slept with Raya. And the others. I tried not to think about it; I excelled at blocking that nugget of information from my mind. But... did he want to go there again? Would he? My back stiffened. I hadn't even thought of that before now. Was he ignoring me publicly because he was doing Raya, or someone else, or all of them, behind my back?

My eyelids drifted closed as a bitter chuckle escaped my lips. It wouldn't even be behind my back, would it? A snort of air huffed out of me as my fingers drove through my hair. He and I were friends. I hadn't asked him for more, and he hadn't offered. My flats slapped against the tile floor as I made my way through the house, barging through the few bodies in my way.

"Where you running off to, Riley? Liss is looking for you out by the pool," Danny yelled.

I waved a hand behind me, calling out, "Need to pee" over my shoulder.

Bursting into the bathroom, I closed the door behind me, my breaths labored, and spun to rest my forehead against the wood. Fuck, I was so stupid. Spinning to the vanity, I twisted the faucet, cupping my hands under the stream of water and meeting my weary eyes in the framed mirror. I blinked once, twice... then threw the water over my face, dropping my head to let it roll off into the basin, my fingers gripping the edges. I stood with my head hung low as I tried to work through my thoughts.

The door creaked open behind me and my body swivelled. My heart fluttered at the sight of Reno's bulky form filling the doorway, his inquisitive gaze pinned on my face. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said quickly, brushing my damp hands together in front of me and wiping them on my jean shorts.

"Your face is all wet," he observed, those deep brown eyes scrutinizing me.

I bunched up my shoulders, passing a hand over my face while studiously avoiding his gaze. "It's a pool party... thought that was the point."

"You haven't been in the pool," he pointed out.

Peering up at him through spiky lashes, I muttered, "Surprised you noticed."

"What?" He stepped closer, all bronzed skin, broad shoulders and defined abs. That perfectly mussed ink black hair. He had no right to look this good. With his olive skin tone, he was always tan, but after the minutest exposure to the sun, he stepped up from GQ model to Greek God. I gulped, my throat bone dry and my pulse racing off into a gallop. With all this in my face, he had me at a massive disadvantage.

Glancing down, I shrugged. "Nothing."

His approach unhurried, he stopped in front of me and hooked a thumb and finger under my chin, forcing my eyes up.

Huffing out a breath, I reluctantly explained myself. "Didn't realize you'd noticed me. Looked like you were too busy enjoying the show."

His head angled back a little and his brow furrowed before realization hit. "Raya?"

I dropped my head again. Fingers still on my face, he instantly pulled it back up, lowering his gaze to mine.

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"Look at me, Riley."

No, thank you.

I heard him sigh. "Damn it, Ri," he muttered. His hands landed on my hips, lifting me off my feet. Before I knew what was happening, my butt met the smooth surface of the

counter. I responded with a little yelp, which he silenced by stepping between my thighs and pressing his lips to mine, coaxing them open.

Every part of me softened. My hands landed on his big shoulders as my lips parted for him without question, without reserve. With our mouths fused together, everything else fell away. He growled low in his throat when I pressed into him, securing his arms around my waist as my hands crawled up his neck, my fingers curling into the damp hair at his nape.

He pulled back a little, breathing heavily, trapping me in his stare. "You think I even see her?"

Eyes bouncing between his, I murmured, "What is this, Ren? What are we doing?"

I didn't want to do it... be the needy girl who had to ask where is this going? but I couldn't help myself. I was about to shape my entire future based on this, on the promise of us. I needed to at least believe that I wasn't just one in a rotation of girls.

He sighed, his hands slid to rub over my upper thighs, giving them a gentle squeeze. "We're spending time together. Having fun. Okay?"

My teeth snagged my lower lip, biting down anxiously. His answer did nothing to ease my concerns. "Are we... having fun... with other people?"

His fingers dug into my flesh and his eyes flashed. "No."

"No?"

Using his grip on my legs, he dragged my body into his and ground his hips into me, eliciting a soft cry from my lips. His hands glided over my skin, sure fingertips sweeping beneath the fabric of my shorts. His stare drilled into me. "I'm not fucking anyone else, Ri, and you damn sure better not be."

A hint of a smile pulled at my mouth as I wriggled closer. "So... exclusive friends?"

Narrowed eyes assessed me, right before his big palms seized each of my butt cheeks and he hauled me up off the vanity like I weighed nothing, settling me flush against his body. My legs folded around his waist like they belonged there. "You're wearing too many clothes for a pool party," he drawled.

"Yeah, maybe. I'm just not sure I want to get wet though." His eyes lit on fire. I clapped my hand over my mouth, stifling a giggle.

Sexy smirk firmly in place, he asked hoarsely, "Anything I can do to change your mind?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

He did. And he didn't totally ignore me after he'd ravished my body in Danny's bathroom either. It felt like a step in the right direction.

It felt like I was making the right choice.

Thirty-Five

Reno

Early morning sunlight filtered through the thin drapes, hitting the back of my closed lids. Prizing them open, I immediately blinked against the stream of light. My gaze fell to the crumpled bed sheets and the golden-haired goddamn angel tangled up in them. Pushing up on my hands, I let my eyes wander over her face, lifting a hand to brush her hair aside. Tiny freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and her long lashes rested along the crest of her cheeks. Fuck, she was beautiful.

I forced my body from the bed, intent on diverting my attention, but my defiant eyes refused to leave Riley's face. A slow exhale flowed past my lips. She'd stayed over again. Warning sounds triggered. I was letting this develop into more than friendship, more than sex. She was steadily creeping back in. Part of me couldn't fucking understand why that was a problem anymore. But I wasn't about to let myself forget.

A few months ago, I'd been in love with this girl. Then everything had gone to shit, ripping my life to shreds. What I'd felt for her then hadn't just disappeared; it had always been there. But I'd changed. I wasn't about to lay everything on the line for something so fickle as love. Life had taught me how goddamn easy it was for someone to love you one minute and be gone the next. My mom had made her choice willingly; she'd abandoned us. That stung. More than I'd ever let myself acknowledge, and it hurt more now that I had no fucking one left. Brett and Owen hadn't chosen to leave, but they still weren't here, were they? And it still hurt like a bitch.

Tearing my gaze away, I threw on the discarded clothes littering the bedroom floor and strode from the room. Grabbing a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge, I took three big gulps as my eyes surveyed the space around me. There was nowhere to hide from the memories in here. The place was too small. I couldn't look at the fridge and not see the door held open, Brett reaching in for another beer, a tinge of guilt in his eyes as he assured me it was his last one. He'd never owed me one damn explanation. Never owed me anything. Never stopped him, though. The sectional still bore mine and O's ass prints from the days we'd sat gaming for hours on end. O demanding a rematch every time I kicked his ass. If I cast my mind back real hard, I could see my mother standing by the counter, wrestling with a can opener, and Brett coming behind her, taking it from her hands with a tender kiss to her cheek.

I shook myself from the reverie. Memories might provide comfort to other people. For me, they served as reminders that life could seem perfectly fucking fine, but we were never more than one bad decision, one twist of fate away from total destruction. I didn't even know if my mother knew about Owen. How fucked up was that? A mother not being aware her son had died. And if she had found out, she hadn't fucking made an effort to get in touch; hadn't attended the funeral or sent her condolences. Bitterness coiled in my gut, and I grit my teeth. Nothing was permanent. No point pretending otherwise. Leon's mom had coerced me into seeing a grief counselor, and apparently my reaction was a natural one. Whatever. I didn't need a shrink to tell me it was pure fucking lunacy to put myself in that position again.

Letting Riley all the way in was the equivalent of laying on a guillotine, waiting for the blade to drop. And it would. It always did. The problem with this kind of guillotine, though? It didn't fucking kill you. No, it took chunks, hacked away piece by piece, until all it left behind was blinding pain. Loving Riley and then losing her would decimate me. Like stepping on an IED and surviving, everything except my beating heart blown to smithereens. And when it came down to it, I'd probably rather be dead.

Stalking from the trailer, desperate to put some distance between me and my supposed casual hook up, I stopped outside Leon's door and thumped a clenched fist against it. Once, twice... ten times.

"Wake up, motherfucker." A groan from inside, followed by a thud and muffled curse, twisted my lips into a half smirk. When his dishevelled ass opened the door, bleary, bloodshot eyes, hair sticking up every fucking which way, I grimaced. "You look like shit."

"Well, I might not if people would let me fucking sleep," he muttered, stumbling away.

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"Doubt that'd make a difference," I quipped, dropping down to straddle a seat at the same table that his upper body was now half laying over, face planted into the wooden surface and his arms covering his head.

"You're fucking pleasant this morning," he grumbled, voice muffled. "No fucking idea why. Thought for sure you must have got some last night."

"Don't start," I warned, levelling a scowl at his bent head. I wasn't getting into this with him again. His head lifted, chin settling onto the littered table top as his inquisitive gaze focused on my face. "What?" I bit out, in no fucking mood. I had my own head laying into me about Riley, I damn sure didn't need his input on top.

"You two still just messing around?"

My jaw tightened. "It was none of your fucking business last time you asked and it's none of your fucking business now."

His brows raised slowly. "She's a friend, Ren, always has been. If you're just going to fuck her over, I'm not okay with that, man." My fists clenched; he clocked my reaction. "Look," he said, raising

up from his sprawled position and laying one arm casually over the back of his chair. "What you've gone through, Ren? Fucking horrendous, shittiest hand of fucking cards ever dealt. And I've got your back, whenever, whatever. But Riley? She looks at you like you hung the fucking moon... always has. Even when I didn't want to see it. Even when she didn't want to see it. She deserves better than being a convenient fuck buddy, man. And you damn well know it."

I couldn't argue with him. She deserved better. I might still love her. Fuck that... I knew I did. But I had no intention of giving her anything besides sex, and even then, she was getting too close. I could go back now, walk in there and end it. Except the thought of it—of not touching her, kissing her, or sinking into her warm heat again, of not burying my face in her hair and breathing her in as she slept in my bed, limbs tangled with mine—bothered me. Like really fucking bothered me. Twisted up my insides until I could hardly fucking breathe, until my stomach wanted to heave, and my damn chest felt like it might cave in. My breaths came faster as my mind grappled to figure out a way to keep her in my life a while longer.

If we were both happy with things as they were, then what the fuck was the problem? She seemed happy. I was okay, for now. I just needed to remember to keep it casual: no more sleeping over, limit it to a few nights a week. And keep my damn heart out of it. I could do that. The pressure behind my ribs eased. Keeping it casual was better for both of us, anyway. We were young. Nobody wanted to tie themselves down at seventeen. She had her whole life ahead of her and she was damn smart. She would leave for college in a few months. No matter what either of us felt now, it wouldn't last. People broke off and went in different directions. How was this different from what every other teenager on the planet did?

"We're both good with how things are. I'm not fucking her around, Le, I'm not sleeping with anyone else. We're happy to keep things light." My tone brooked no argument.

I'd rationalized what Ri and I had, what we were doing, and I'd put an expiration date on our relationship. One that was necessary—so I didn't start expecting this thing to last forever—but wasn't today or tomorrow, or anywhere close to imminent. And, apparently, it was one I could live with.

Leon looked at me, his expression dubious, then lowered his gaze to his phone as it pinged. "You sure about that?"

Flattening my palms on the table for leverage, I pushed up from the chair and cast him a hard glare. "What the fuck do you want, Le? A goddamn marriage proposal? Christ, I'm eighteen, not thirty-five! We're having sex. We enjoy it. It works for us. So back the fuck off."

He held both hands aloft, his head bobbing as he conceded, "Okay, I hear ya, don't get your damn panties all wadded up, princess. Now, sit the fuck down. Danny just texted. He and Jase are on their way here. If I'm fucking relegated to the trailer, might as well make use of it. You in?"

The anger evaporated and the tension that had gathered across my shoulder blades fell away as we slipped back into our normal roles as friends, rather than one asshole and one fucker perched on his moral high ground. Dick.

"No Mack?"

Le grimaced. "Dude's in a world of pain right now."

A grin formed. "How is it that a fucker that massive can't handle his drink?"

"That ain't the worst of it. Dude's gonna have to schedule a trip to the nearest STD clinic. Crazy motherfucker hooked up with Ash last night... bareback!"

My brows rose. "The fuck...?"

Le shrugged, grabbing a garbage bag from beneath the counter and holding it open at the edge of the table with one hand. He attempted to swipe all the crap into it with his bent arm. About half scattered either side, landing on the floor. I sniggered. He shot me a scowl.

"Wanna fucking help, man? Standing there like an ornament... make yourself useful." I bent to retrieve an empty soda can, dropping it into the open bag with a flourish. "Yeah, stupid fucker could barely see straight. Now, there's a vindictive bitch who'd get herself knocked up on purpose just to ruin someone's life. Mack's beyond shitting it."

I scratched at the scruff on my jaw, a deep frown etched into my forehead. "Damn. This happened at Danny's place?"

"Yeah. After you'd left. I told him, I said what the fuck, dude? You always suit up before you go into battle, and especially with those hoes. I fuck 'em, but I bring my own damn protective gear."

I nodded in agreement. Neither one of us could say we hadn't gone there with Raya and her groupies, but we weren't stupid about it. I'd never had sex without a rubber. My brow furrowed. Until Riley. I'd had sex with Riley without a condom. The one and only time. I scrubbed a hand down my face, wiping the memory. Or lack thereof. I still couldn't remember most of that night. It was the morning after that I'd realized the monumental fuck-up I'd made. Not using protection had been the least of my worries. I'd acted like a fucking animal, and I should have taken better care of her.

"Ren?" My head bounced up, my distracted gaze meeting Le's curious stare.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"You in?"

I palmed my phone, my fingers tensing around it. I wanted to shoot a text off to Riley, not just bail with no word. Scratch that, what I wanted to do was slide back into my bed beside her, spread her thighs and drive into her from behind. But I wouldn't do either. Letting someone know where you were, waking up beside them and picking up where you left off before you fell asleep together, those were the things couples did. We weren't a couple. We weren't going to be. Nothing lasted. Didn't matter how much you wanted it to. This might not end today, but it would end. It had to end. "Yeah, I'll stay."

Ten minutes later, Danny and Jase showed up in Leon's car, hollering to someone across the park. I craned my neck until I could see out the window behind me. Riley. My throat dried up, my groin tightening instantly. Still clad in short shorts that made her slim tan legs look a mile long, and the loose tank she'd worn yesterday, she was a fucking sight. I wondered if she'd bothered putting the bikini on underneath. I couldn't suppress a groan as she strutted past the window, stopping with a cocked hip once she reached the guys.

Danny shot her a smirk. "In yesterday's clothes?"

Why the fuck did that asshole know what she was wearing yesterday? My feet were moving before I could process the intention. Riley shrugged. "What can I say? It's laundry day. This is all I had."

Jase scoffed. "Laundry day? What's that code for... a spin cycle on Reno's dick?" Smart-mouthed motherfucker. He and Danny slapped each other a high five. Jesus.

I caught Riley's eye roll as I pushed the door open. Her head swung to me instantly, those bright green eyes growing wide before she swallowed visibly, her throat working, and blanked her features. Turning back to Jason, she flattened her palm and cracked it over the back of his head. "Don't be disgusting, jerk."

"Ow!" he muttered, scrubbing his hand over his head with a frown.

The edges of my mouth turned up. Man, she was something else. I looked at her and she fucking broke me. Her sass, her demeanor. That gorgeous goddamn face. All of it. If my balls ached, then my chest ached ten times harder. Shake it the fuck off, man. Clearing my throat loudly, I folded my arms over my chest and eyed Jase and Danny.

"You two gonna stand there pissing about all day, or you gonna come inside so I can kick both of your asses on COD?"

"Oh, he's delusional today. Must be all the steam from Riley's laundry screwing with his head, huh, Riley?" Her hand shot out again. Both idiots ducked, weaving out of her range. When they were at a safe distance, Danny turned back with a wink. "You guys aren't nearly as sly as you think you are." When he spun around, I was inches away. "Whoa, motherfucker!" he gasped. "Fucking sneak up on people like that!"

"Shut the fuck up, Dan."

His lips twisted into a smirk, but he mimed shutting the fuck up and shuffled past me as he followed Jase inside. My eyes locked on Riley's the second the door swung shut behind me. The closed door didn't fool me into thinking we didn't have an audience. Her cheeks flushed pink, and the sight was so fucking endearing, my heart pounded and my fingers itched to trace over her warm skin. Fuck. Shut that shit down. This is only fucking... and it's temporary.

Schooling my features, I offered her a brief nod. One that asked are you good without voicing the words. She nodded, sinking her teeth into that full bottom lip, and my blood heated. I heard a growl rumble in my chest before I'd clocked it had come from me. She heard it. With a sultry smile, she twisted her hands behind her back and began walking away, still facing me. I wanted her. In a bed, a car, over a table. Right here on the grass with the guys and every other nosy fucker watching on. And she knew it.

Eventually she swirled around, granting me a glance of that perfect ass swathed in tight denim, and swung her hips with an exaggerated sway. When her small hand curled around the door handle, she glanced back over her shoulder, her eyes gleaming and the morning sun shining over her still tousled dirty blonde hair.

"Have a good day, Ren." She smiled before disappearing inside.

Was she kidding? Blue balls. All damn day.

And that's what I got for leaving her to wake up alone.

Fuck.

I spent

the rest of the afternoon at Le's, talking shit, eating shit, smoking shit. It was unproductive as fuck, but it was the perfect location to stake out Riley's trailer so I'd know the second her mom left for work in her beat up old banger, the exhaust coughing like a ninety-year-old with fucking emphysema. Made sense, it looked to be around that age. As soon as the clouds of exhaust fumes cleared, I ditched the guys without explanation, and took the ten strides that separated the two homes faster than my ass had ever moved before. I'd fucking defy Usain Bolt to beat my time.

Knuckles rapping on the door, I waited. Riley hadn't left all afternoon, and I knew that because I'd kept one of my eyes trained on her door for the past ten hours, like a straight-up, certified creeper. I lifted my fist to knock again, but stopped at the sound of music filtering from inside. She couldn't even fucking hear me. Dropping my hand to the handle instead, I pushed, and it clicked open without resistance. Unlocked! Fucking irresponsible woman! Brows knitted in irritation, my feet made a beeline for the small bedroom at the back, the steady thrum of the bass increasing the closer I got.

Annoyance pulsed through me at the fact that this girl seemed hell-bent on winding up dumped in a shallow grave with her throat slit or some shit. I was fully fucking intent on introducing her to a little something known as a sense of self-preservation... until the girl in question waltzed into my eye-line through the six-inch gap in the door. Clothed in nothing except a tiny lace thong, her hair still damp, and sticking to the skin over her shoulders and back. Safe to say the anger melted like ice on a steam grate, replaced by a surge of desire so fucking strong my knees threatened to buckle and my dick sprang to life like a defibrillator had shocked it. Zero to fucking sixty in approximately nought point nought seconds. Actually, fuck that—I'd been sporting a semi since she'd strutted past me in those tight little shorts this morning. Now, it was goddamn painful. I couldn't resist watching her unobserved. But when she grabbed a matching sleep short and cami set, I made my presence known. No sense letting her get dressed, I'd have her naked again in less than two minutes.

"It's as if you're trying to get yourself killed."

Her head damn near hit the roof of the trailer, her pale hands clutching the material in a death grip against her heaving chest. "What the fucking Jesus is wrong with you!" she demanded, voice shrill, every other word punctured by a labored gulp for air.

Stepping into her space, I felt my lips curve up into a satisfied smirk and twitched a brow. "You should keep your door locked, Ri. It could have been anyone strolling in here finding you in your underwear." My gaze trailed her body as I closed the distance between us, fire burning through every single part of me.

Her chin tipped, her jaw clenched and her eyes narrowed. She was pissed and trying to convey that fact, but her slim shoulders rose and fell faster with every step I took toward her. And she was still naked except for a scrap of lace, so the effect was lost.

"I wish it had been someone else, you jackass! And quit looking at me like that!" she snapped, her green eyes flashing. But I watched her face flush, and she was still panting like a train.

My head tilted, lips curling as my eyes devoured her. I knew exactly how I was looking at her. I also knew I had zero intention of stopping. Still I murmured, "Like what?"

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Once her breathing had calmed enough that she could form a sentence without choking for air, she aimed a mean ass glare right at me along with a slim finger which, incidentally, revealed one perfect creamy breast. It looked fuller than I remembered. My dick fucking throbbed. "You know!" she grated.

"What I know," I said, as I prowled toward her, slowly erasing the last few inches of distance separating our bodies, "is that you seem to have a willful disregard for your own fucking safety." My feet stopped when they touched her toes. Her eyes clouded with something besides fury. Something I could definitely work with.

Gaze locked on to her wide eyes, my fingers closed around the fabric fisted in her hands, tugging until her grip loosened, and I tossed them somewhere behind me. My eyes lowered, burning a trail down her body. Her breath hitched, perfect breasts lifting and falling with every accelerated inhale and exhale. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. I bent my head and dipped my tongue to the hollow beneath her throat. At that touch, she jumped me. I was more than fucking ready.

Her hands grasped my shoulders, probably breaking the skin with her nails, and she thrust herself up and onto my body. Fastening her legs around me, she slammed her lips down on mine. Our teeth clashed, and my tongue rushed past her lips. She had my goddamn head spinning within seconds and my shirt over my head in around the same time. A loud groan ripped from me as my palms curved over her taut ass, grabbing handfuls and working it in my grip. She responded with a long, low moan, her teeth biting down on my bottom lip until I tasted the metallic tang of blood. Hauling her right into me, I pulled my head back and watched her eyes roll back into her head. Her wet hair was plastered across her face, and her cheeks were flushed pink. All of her inhibitions gone.

It was times like this that I questioned my logic; when I had her falling apart in my arms, her prickly exterior all mellowed out as she melted for me. I couldn't keep her, and I damned well knew it, but how the fuck could I go without this? I gave myself a mental

fucking shake and told myself that was just my hormones talking. They were in charge right now. Reason fled the building the second I saw her through that door, which was fine, providing I stayed detached. And God knows, I could fuck without feelings. It was the only way I'd ever done it. Before Riley.

So, as I lowered her to the edge of the bed, carefully spreading her thighs and slipping her panties over her legs, I battled every trace of emotion swelling in my chest, choking me from the inside. As I looked down at her, lowering my arm to dip a finger between her folds and confirm she was ready, I pretended I didn't see my hand tremble. I clenched my jaw against the pretty words I wanted to whisper to her, damn near biting off my tongue.

When my brain demanded I avoid her gaze as I shucked my pants and lined myself up with her, my eyes had other ideas, straying to meet a smoldering green gaze that punched a hole right through me. I instructed myself to ignore it, to thrust into her hard and fast, focus only on getting us both off, but my body had a mind of its own, pushing into her achingly slowly, inch by agonizing goddamn inch, and feeling it everywhere. With my face hovering just above hers, my greedy eyes relished in watching every emotion that played out across her expressive face as I filled her. And despite every fucking voice screaming at me that it was the dumbest thing I could do, I lowered my lips to hers and kissed her softly as I started moving inside of her body. I wasn't fucking her right now. And I goddamn knew it.

I was screwing everything up. Confusing the hell out of a situation that was already twenty shades of fucked up. Probably giving the girl beneath me ideas she shouldn't be having. But as my hands tangled in her hair and her body rose to meet mine, I couldn't find it in me to give a fuck. I couldn't find it in me to fuck her like I didn't love her. Because I did.

I'd have to deal with the consequences of tonight later. I'd have to erase it all from my head and pretend like fuck that it didn't happen. Right now, I just wanted to fucking love her.

I breathed into her, and every bit of shit storming my head evaporated like a fine mist.

Later. I could live with later.

Thirty-Six

Riley

"It's your eighteenth, Liss, you have to celebrate."

"Yeah, Alissa." Leon's head appeared between both of ours, his pouty lips dropping a wet kiss onto Liss' cheek before snapping back quickly when she rounded on him, her

eyes flashing and her left fist flying. Her other hand swiped furiously at the damp patch on her cheek.

“What have I told you about those disgusting lips, jerk stain!” Liss seethed, still scrubbing at her skin as her face contorted with unadulterated disgust.

Leon, at a relatively safe distance from my best

friend, swung his grinning face in my direction. “Hey, Ri!” He wagged his brows, snagging a fry from my plate as he dumped his ass onto the seat beside me. “I spoke to Momma Bear couple of nights ago...” He broke off with his brows raised, as if I should know where the hell this conversation was going.

I shrugged, pursing my lips. “And...?”

“She told me you got in. Atlanta. We were shooting the shit the other night while she finished her joint, right after that sexy ass friend of hers dropped her home—man, that woman is fucking fine, and she wants me, I can tell—”

“Le,” I muttered with a subtle shake of my head as his gaze glazed over.

“Oh, right, fuck, I’ve got a vivid imagination.”

“I’ll bet,” I scoffed, fighting a grin.

He winked. “So, anyway, yeah, your mom said you got in.”

I sighed as my shoulders drooped. The fewer people who knew about that, the better. Sure, it was my life, my decision and all that jazz, but every additional person who knew about it, was another person who would one hundred percent disapprove of my choices. And I hated seeing that disappointment in their eyes. Plus, the last thing I wanted was for Reno to find out. We were finally getting somewhere. I could feel him letting his guard down, little by little. It was tentative, but something shifted over the weekend. I felt it. I know he felt it, too. Sure, he woke and threw on his armor, like he could box up his feelings and pretend they didn’t exist. So, he still needed more time. I wanted nothing to spook him. Which meant I needed to keep this development on the down low, preferably until forever, but if not, then at least until we’d packed some solid ground beneath our feet. Problem with that, Le was no vault. The guy couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it. So, damage control. Give the guy nothing to work with.

“Uh, yeah. I’m still figuring a lot of stuff out.”

Leon looked me over, his face clear of any obvious emotion, which was unnerving. Normally I could read him like a book. Then he bobbed his head, thoughtful. Even more unsettling. “Yeah, she mentioned that.”

I shrugged, all nonchalant, but my nails bit into my skin and I was struggling not to shrink under his intrusive stare. What the hell was my mom doing standing around smoking a joint with my friends? Her inability to accept she wasn't a goddamn teenager caused me no end of problems. "There are a few things I need to, uh... consider, you know, before I make my decision."

He rubbed his thumb over his jaw, his probing eyes flat out refusing to detach from mine. "But you're going to school, right?"

I finally relented and glanced away, shrugging again in a non-committal way, "Sure. Just not sure where. Yet."

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And now I could feel Liss' stare boring into me, just as interested in my answer. Sweat beaded on my brow. She'd been hounding me relentlessly since she saw that stupid damn letter. Risking a quick peek up through a curtain of hair, I caught her and Leon exchanging a silent look. Goddamn. Scrambling to change the subject, I all but screeched into Leon's ear and clapped my hands together. "Party for Liss' birthday this weekend, yes?"

A firm No and a Fuck, yeah, rang out in unison, and I latched onto the latter like it was a life preserver and I was adrift at sea, a dozen hungry sharks circling me beneath the surface. Party planner I was not, but if I could avoid an unwanted conversation this lunchtime, I'd grab a sparkly binder and plan my sweating ass off.

Liss caught my gaze, flashing me an unmistakable I know what you're doing look.

Shit.

After making my escape and hiding in the bathroom for the rest of lunch period, I waited until the warning bell sounded before sauntering down the corridor, marginally late for gym, and completely unbothered by that fact. I stopped by my locker and entered the combination, flinging it open before dropping my sweater inside. Gym sucked ass. I'd already decided I had a stomach-ache that would sadly render me incapable of participating today. Volleyball didn't bother me one way or the other, I could take or leave it. Volleyball with Raya and five of her pumped-up posse? Yeah, I could leave that all day long. Either their aim was atrocious, or they actively tried to land every single ball in my face. Mrs. Carson was too dumb or too blind to notice their skills had not improved one iota and readily accepted the fake ass apologies they sniggered their way

through. I wasn't down for a black eye today, or a suspension after I finally snapped and landed a right hook on Raya's cheek. No doubt Carson would damn well see that. So... menstrual cramps it was.

Right as the thought entered my mind, another quickly followed. When did I last have menstrual cramps? The effort of stretching my mind back became painful, seriously painful. I stood rooted to the spot, brows pinched together, as I desperately sought information my brain couldn't supply. I felt my grip clench around the door of my locker, the metal biting into my clammy palms. My heart pounded unevenly in my chest.

I couldn't breathe.

Come on, come on... when the hell was it? I must know, surely? An ache bloomed between my furrowed brows, quickly spreading across my forehead and down over my face. Fuck. Dropping my bag like it held a bomb, I sank to my knees with a heavy thud, the impact audible, but barely registering in my panicked state. I'd had a period recently. Obviously, I had. I must have. But I couldn't fucking remember when!

March? February? I couldn't think. The vines in my head coiled and slithered until I stumbled upon a memory that sent acid straight to my gut. The contents of my stomach threatened to make a reappearance. I'd been staying at Ren's in the days after Owen and Brett passed and I'd had to go home to get tampons. It was the last unopened box in the cabinet. I'd used all but one and made a mental note to replace them for next time. I hadn't replaced them. I hadn't fucking replaced them! Not possible. Not even remotely possible.

That was what... the second to last week in January? No way. We were a week into April. That wasn't possible. Did it work like that? Why didn't I know more about this stuff? How the hell did these things work? My mind spun like I was on a tilt-o-whirl, scrambling to piece together all the parts of the puzzle without hyperventilating. If I hadn't already been on the floor, I'd have hit it like a sack of potatoes. I was going to throw up. My head shot up. Wouldn't I have been throwing up if... I couldn't even think about it. Couldn't bring myself to contemplate the word. Hope swirled in me, pushing me to my feet as I stuffed everything in my locker and slammed it shut. Throwing up. I would have been throwing up. I would have been. I would have.

The pads of my fingers tapped the screen of my phone like I was possessed, letters appearing so fast my eyes couldn't keep up.

Me: I need you! Right NOW!!!

Three seconds later.

Me: This is fucking urgent, Liss!

I bounced the phone up and down in my open palm impatiently, willing Liss to see it. Relief slammed through me when the little dots materialized on the screen.

Liss: Wtf?

Me: Can you get out of class?

Liss: Sure...

Goddamn. Was she being deliberately vague? Or was that just me freaking the fuck out?

Me: So do it then. Meet me outside the girls' bathroom by my locker. Please.

No response. Zero dots. Arghhhh.

Me: ALISSA!

Liss: Cool your jets, woman! On my way. It was either leave the class or spew all over Mr. Reynold's shiny brown loafers... he threw me out faster than he could lace up those bad boys.

What felt like a lifetime later, a blonde head rounded the corner. Shooting forward, I snatched her arm and dragged her into the girls' bathroom behind me.

"What the...?"

"I'm late," I blurted, interrupting her.

She frowned, smacking gum between her teeth. "So, what else is new? You're always late. Since when do you care?"

I grit my teeth; the words squeezing out between them. "Not late to class, Liss! I'm late, late."

Her blue eyes widened, meeting mine. "You don't mean...?"

I nodded solemnly, lowering my gaze.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure, so much has been going on. But... maybe January?" I admitted, voice lowering to barely a whisper.

Liss' eyes shot wide, along with her mouth, the wad of gum dropping to the floor with a quiet thud. Right next to the splattered organ formerly known as my heart.

“Holy mother fucker of shitsville! What the fuck, Riley? January?? Like the first month of the year, January?”

I shrugged helplessly, recognizing how much of an idiot I was. “I think so. I mean, I’m not always totally regular, but...”

“How can you just be learning this now? How do you not know you've missed like twenty periods? What the hell is wrong with you? I mean, this is some I-didn't-know-I-was-pregnant-til-the-kid-dropped-into-the-toilet-bowl shit right here. Christ! If I look between your legs is a baby gonna be staring back at me, all gums and bewildered face, like oh, hey... surprise!”

“Jesus, Liss!” I whisper-hissed, eyes darting anxiously around. “First of all, lower your voice. And second, I... I... don't know. Okay? There's been a lot going on. And when Ren and I were together after the funeral, I just... I wasn't expecting it. I lied and told him after that I'd gone on the pill, only because I didn't want it to be an issue, or for him to feel obligated to do something about it. It was already awkward enough. And I meant to go get some Plan B, I swear to God, I did. But then everything happened and I just, I must have forgotten. Fuck!” I pressed the heel of my palms into my eye sockets. How had I done that? How could I have been so stupid? Her slim hand rubbed my upper arm, but her eyes were super wide in her face as she bounced on her feet, frantically chewing her thumbnail. She blew out a breath, nodding.

“Okay... so, okay. Did you take a test?”

I shook my head. She clapped her hands, her expression taking on a look of focused determination, like she could somehow gain control of this shit-storm of a situation.

“Well, we need to get a test.” She started moving past me, her strides determined, until she got about fifteen feet and realized I wasn't following.

My eyes met hers vacantly. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't. So much had gone wrong in such a brief space of time. I couldn't deal with this right now. Reno definitely couldn't deal with it right now. It wasn't in my plans. It was the opposite of my plans. And there was nothing surer in this world than the fact that this would not, in any way, shape or form, fit into Reno's plans. I turned to Liss, my movements slow and hazy, and whispered, “I didn't think... I didn't...”

Her arms came around me, squeezing, holding me together. “I know. It's okay. It'll be okay.”

I felt myself nodding in agreement, maybe to appease her, maybe to reassure myself, but honestly I knew nothing of the sort, and neither did she. How could it be okay? How could any of this be okay? Reno would never want this. It was taking every effort I possessed just to convince him he wanted me! My shoulders shook before I even

registered the sound of the pained sob echoing through the hallway as mine. Liss held tighter.

"Maybe all the stress messed up your cycle? That happens. I've heard that can happen. I bet that's what it is."

Thirty minutes later, a white stick proved Liss wrong in the most life-shattering way possible.

"Positive."

Strange how the connotations so strongly associated with that word couldn't be farther from how I felt in this moment. I'd asked Liss to read it out. I couldn't bring myself to look. As if by not reading it, it would give me the outcome I so desperately wanted. Which was stupid. It was unchangeable now, whether it was me, Liss or the goddamn Pope himself who looked at the damn stick. No amount of wishing, hoping, judgement or regret could alter the damage that I'd caused. And that was how it felt. I didn't suddenly become overwhelmed with maternal instincts or feelings of deep love. This was not anything I could accept right now.

My brain shut down, leaving behind a numb fuzziness I welcomed.

"Riley?" Liss' concerned voice seemed to filter through an ocean of water. I shook my head clear, but the whooshing noise only intensified. Until it was all I could hear. Until my ears rang and my heart pounded, and I couldn't take a breath. My chest was tight, so, so tight. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe.

"Riley?"

My hands clutched at my chest, my brain whirling until it felt like the world was spinning around me, instead of the sun. Liss' worried face swam past me, appearing and disappearing from view, over and over, making me nauseous. I slammed my lids closed, trying to get off this damn carousel of horrors, trying to suck in air and calm my roiling stomach. But I couldn't. I dry-heaved once. Darkness seeped in around the edges of my vision. I could feel the panic rising, choking me, clawing up my throat like sharp fingernails.

Liss' voice carried to me through the fog, coaching me, instructing me to stay calm, to breathe. With whatever remained of my rational thought, I latched on to her words, sucking in air greedily, exhaling long and low. After what felt like hours, the panic receded, my vision cleared, and my heart rate stabilized.

Sitting on Liss' bedroom floor, the enormity of my situation fully registered, the crushing weight of it pressed down on me until it felt like I might never be able to get up.

"You okay?" Liss asked, then cursed. "Sorry, stupid question."

Shrugging one shoulder, I pulled my legs up and rested my forehead on my bent knees. "I just don't want to think about it right now... is that okay?"

"Talk about something else?"

"Please."

She bumped her shoulder into mine. "It's not fucked up, Ri. It's just a bump in the road—"

"Bump?" I turned to her with a brow hiked. "Really?"

"Shit! That was totally unintentional."

Pushing to my feet, I nodded and sucked in my bottom lip. A bump in the road. I hated driving. And I couldn't even let someone else take the wheel this time. I could distract myself, though. I had to plan a party. There was so much to do.

"What theme are we going for?"

"No theme!" she said, adamant. "Not even if it's triplets!"

A full body shudder rolled through me. Then I firmly lowered the shutters on that section of my mind. Not yet.

Not yet.

Thirty-Seven

Riley

"Oh my god, I did something stupid! Something so incredibly fucking stupid, Riley!"

"Um... hi to you, too," I said, balancing the phone between my ear and shoulder, a basket of clean laundry hiked high on my left hip.

"Yeah, hi, hello... fucking hola! But I did something I shouldn't have, and really, it's all your fault. And I know I can't blame you because you're all... that thing we can't talk about, and have like actual problems to deal with, but... I did something really fucking stupid!" She was out of breath by the time she'd finished, the words spilling like verbal diarrhea.

"Start at the top, Liss." I set the basket down on my bed, dropping the phone beside it and putting it on speaker. There was no-one to overhear Liss' dramatic confession. My mom was at Marshall's, again. Not that anything Liss had to say would offend her.

I heard Liss' measured intake of breath and smiled as I folded a sweater, suddenly eager to hear about someone else's drama. The-thing-that-couldn't-be-spoken-of wasn't so easy to brush aside in my head. For every minute I didn't think about it, I could count ten that I did. It was surreal, and I couldn't convince myself it was real because I had no symptoms. Well, my boobs were bigger, which I'm sure was a thing, and then there was the obvious lack of my period. A fact I'd failed to notice for a decade. But really, I was all good. Except I wasn't because... well... but I wasn't thinking about it right now.

"You refused to hang out last night, and I made a horrible mistake!"

"Okay, tell me all about your stupid mistake. Did you meet the guys at the cornfields?" My lips immediately moved to form the question I wanted to know the answer to—was Reno there?—but I caught the words before they left my mouth. I'd told him I wasn't feeling great when he'd texted. It wasn't a lie.

"Yes. Which is how everything got fucked up!" She muttered a curse, then paused. It dragged on for so long, I was about to ask if she was still there. Then she said, "I kissed Leon."

"What?" I screeched. It was possibly the last thing I would have expected to fall out of her mouth. If she'd told me she'd killed a guy last night, wrapped him up in an old carpet and we had to bury his body in the woods, I'd have been less stunned. "Leon? Like Leon, Leon?"

An extended gargled groan type noise served as confirmation.

"Wow! I thought you guys hated each other."

"We did!" she yelled, then immediately corrected. "Do! We do! That's why I don't get how this happened. I didn't even drink, Ri! I can't blame alcohol. I was giving him a ride home when the stupid jerk spilled a full cup of beer all over my car. I pulled over, tossed his ass out, or rather he fell out, and we were yelling at each other. One minute I wanted to wrap my hands around his throat and strangle the life out of him, and the next... the next he pushed me up against the side of the car and we were attacking each other like horny rabid animals! What the fuck, Riley?"

I pressed my lips together, fighting the laugh that would earn me an ear bashing. "There's a th

in line between love and hate, Liss. I think you crossed it."

"No, with us there's hate and more hate. He fucking confused me, and it won't happen again. But there's no way I can face him so soon, which is why I'm not coming tonight."

"What!?" I yelled for the second time in as many minutes. "It's your party! You have to go. You're going."

"Absolutely not. Celebrate without me. Send pics or whatever, and I'll enjoy it vicariously."

"There's no vicariously about it. You're coming. If I have to play the-thing-that-can't-be-mentioned card, I will," I said. When she didn't respond, I whined, "I need you there, Liss. Oh, and one more thing... it's for you! Do I need to remind you of that? Plus, I never took you for a coward, Alissa Bedford."

"Argh! You know what? This is bullshit!"

"Oh, you're so welcome for your party, by the way!" I shot back, pairing up what I belatedly noticed were odd socks. I added them to the pile anyway.

"Fucking fine then. But uninvite Leon," she demanded.

"Why... you worried you won't be able to resist him?"

"You're an asshole."

"I know." I laughed, tossing a second pair of mismatched socks on top of the pile. Still, I did nothing to rectify the sock situation. Odd socks, it seemed, were a problem unworthy of my consideration. "In all seriousness... do you like him? Like, are you attracted to him? I mean, I know you guys rile each other up the wrong way, like, ninety-nine percent of the time, but beyond that... is there something there?"

I expected an instant denial. What I got was an extended pause. Eventually she said, "Honestly, I've never looked at him that way before. He followed you around with moon eyes for so long, I don't think it would have even entered my mind to consider it. But now that you've asked, I... I guess I don't know. Does that... I mean, is that weird for you?"

"No!" I said, my tone emphatic. "God, no! You of all people know that Leon and I weren't really a thing. God, no. And he didn't have moon eyes, Liss. I think it was more that he wanted what I couldn't give him, you know? And that made him want it more. If you like him, I have no problem with it." She went quiet again, my brows pulled together. "Liss?"

"Huh? Oh, right, yeah. It's not like anything will happen though, right? We'd kill each other after five minutes, anyway."

I huffed a laugh. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe that just means there's something there worth exploring. I would say give it a shot, except what the hell do I know? I'm the last person who should give out advice."

Liss jumped on my words, never one to let an opportunity go by. "Since you brought it up..."

I exhaled heavily, planting my butt on the bed and mentally bracing myself for the inevitable questions.

"Have you spoken to him about your predicament?"

Of course not! "That would be no."

"I talked to him last night," she said. My heart clenched, fingertips curling into the comforter. "Don't worry, I didn't say anything about... you know. I was just trying to get a bit of a read on his emotional state, you know, ask how he was doing, that sort of stuff. The guy's a hard nut to crack, huh?"

My head dropped in agreement. "Tell me about it." I stopped, thumbnail lodged between my teeth. "How did he seem?"

Hope was a cruel emotion. It bloomed like a pretty flower, eliciting feelings and emotions that should stay locked away, and then just like that, it wilted and died, the brown, shrivelled petals falling to the floor. Liss' prolonged silence was an example.

"Erm... he didn't say much," she hedged, but I'd known her far too long. She was holding back so much more than she was saying.

Lids stinging, I nodded. I'm sure Liss was interested in Reno's state of mind. They went back a long way and were friends, but I was under no illusion as to the main purpose of her interrogation. She wanted to know where his head was at with our relationship, and determine how he might react to the recent development he was still clueless about. And if her stilted response was any indication, he hadn't filled her with confidence. My heart sank. I already knew this... I knew he wasn't going around shouting about us from the rooftops. So why did it hurt so much?

"I see," I said. Knowing Liss, she'd asked him straight up if he and I were together. If he wouldn't admit that we were more than a booty call to my best friend, how could I ever approach him about... anything else?

"I think you need to talk to him. I mean, no, the prospect of having a baby at eighteen probably won't thrill him, but that's normal, right? We know this. We're not expecting him

to pull out the old cigars and chug a gallon of beer in celebration. But he still needs to know, babe. You shouldn't have to deal with this all on your own."

Her words invaded my head like a poison, seeping through every crevice and tarnishing everything it touched. I wasn't ready. I just wasn't. My breaths stalled.

"I can't, Liss, I can't."

"Okay, okay," she said, quickly backing off. "But this isn't something that will go away on its own. You know that. And eventually, he will find out."

I nodded silently. "After the party," I said, voice small.

"Okay. After the party." Silence, and then she sighed. "He might surprise you."

Yeah. And he might just annihilate me.

Thirty-Eight

Riley

Under normal circumstances, arranging an eighteenth birthday shindig would have been fairly straightforward: locate a venue, post the deets on social media, get my mom to buy a keg (which, not to her credit, she would), create a playlist, turn up. The end.

So, when my eyes scanned Danny's packed yard, adorned with countless streamers, maybe a hundred balloons, handmade banners and blown up photos of Liss as a baby, I figured I might have run just a little too far with this distraction. Danny, with the biggest square footage and frequent socializers for parents, was the logical choice for location, and conveniently for me, he didn't give a rat's ass—his words—how I decorated the place.

It looked good. People came, some unwelcome—enter Raya Mitchell—but causing a scene given my current state seemed downright juvenile. Liss was having a blast, albeit completely avoiding Leon... who did the same. Whether they thought they were being sneaky, I hadn't decided, but they were failing. Their gazes strayed to each other, on average, every three point five seconds. It was both humorous and frustrating to a bystander watching. That bystander would be me, the sober girl hiding out in the smallest corner of the backyard, trying to fade into the background. The amount of times someone had tried to hand me a drink was worrying. We were all destined to suffer from serious alcohol abuse problems in the not-too-distant future. Some were blatantly already there. So, I'd held on to a cup. If my hand was empty, people appeared like ninja waiters, armed and ready to remedy such an unhappy occurrence.

It wasn't a conscious choice I'd made—not drinking. I'd held a cup of beer to my lips and just... never drank it. It scared me to look deeper into my actions, to decipher what they might mean. So, I didn't. I just kept on not drinking. And hiding.

"Hey, there you are. Ren's been looking for you," Jason said as he rounded the corner of the house, dumping a bulging bag of trash into the garbage.

"Oh," I replied. He was the second person who'd told me that. The phone wedged in my jean pocket indicated the same.

I'd seen Reno since.... yeah, that. Each time, I'd tried to act normal, but lying to him, or rather withholding information from him, was hard. It seemed easier to just avoid him altogether, but he didn't seem happy about my standoffish behaviour. Our arrangement was supposedly casual, so it shouldn't have been a problem. But every time I told him I couldn't meet up, it seemed to bother him. I was trying not to read too much into it. He didn't know everything yet.

"You coming in?"

I didn't notice Jason had paused, the bag discarded, his puzzled eyes on my face.

"Oh, uh... yeah. Be there in a minute." I offered a forced smile to counteract the weird.

His brow furrowed, head tilting as he bent his knees to peer closer. "You okay, Wiley?"

I couldn't even muster up the drive to clap him around the head. It was our thing. His concern appeared genuine, for once. He earned himself a pass. "Yeah," I murmured.

"Whoa," he uttered, straightening. "You just gonna let that fly? What the fuck is up with you?" The saucer eyes would have been funny, except my world was due to implode any day now, and laughing felt like a luxury I could no longer afford.

"Just got a headache, Jase. Don't worry... I'll owe you that head slap, and you know I'm good for it."

A huge grin broke out over his pretty face. Jase was way too boy band for me, but those baby blues and styled sandy blonde hair didn't hurt his appeal with the rest of the student body. He was a big goofball though, rarely without a silly smile on his face.

"Kay, Ri." He emphasized my name, tipping his head as he did, brows up. "You see... you see how I didn't rack 'em up?" His pointer finger tapped his temple twice, before circling his face. "It ain't all about this baby. I got the brains, too. Full package right here." His arm swept the length of his body, and I couldn't resist a smile. He was good people.

"No need to tell me, Jase," I said with a chuckle.

"Aaa-ight," he drawled, swivelling on the balls of his feet. "See you inside, yeah?"

I nodded with a proper smile.

I should have guessed he'd give away my hiding place. Strong arms wrapped around me from behind, locking at my waist. An open mouth rested in the hollow between my neck and shoulder, soft breaths tickled my skin. A shiver traveled down the length of my spine, all the way to my toes.

"Been looking for you," Reno murmured into my skin, his teeth nibbling. There was no preventing my body from sagging back into him, or my heart racing to a gallop. "I missed you."

His quiet admission brought tears to my eyes.

We'd done the hard part, fought our way through the desert, ocean, and wilderness. Overcome every obstacle in our path. And right when the other side was in sight, one I

ast hurdle appeared in our path. This obstacle was by far the biggest. I knew this one would trip us up. That it was probably insurmountable. I turned into him and pressed my lips to his mouth, anyway. His hands gripped me immediately, lifting me up. My body fit against his like we were two parts of a puzzle, and my back collided with the wall as our kiss turned heated. Like kindling, one spark and we were up, flames soaring into the night sky.

He might surprise you.

My eyes flew open, limbs locking. Reno pulled back, confused gaze searching mine. "You okay?" He asked, breathing hard.

"Yeah," I said, slowly.

His forehead dropped to mine. "Why does it feel like you've been avoiding me?"

"Because I have," I said, legs dropping to the ground. Unease crept over his features.

He dipped, his head lowering until it was level with mine. "What's going on, Ri? This isn't working for you? That why you're avoiding me?"

I noted the tick in his jaw and the alarm in his eyes. This was more than sex. I could goddamn see it. Bolstered by the realization, I made a grave mistake. I allowed hope to bloom, to dictate my choices and choose my words.

"I've been thinking," I started, suddenly buoyant and entertaining the possibility that we might get through this one last stumbling block. But I thought it would be best to ease him in, start small, and gauge his reaction. "I might stick around here instead of going away to school in the fall. If I got in now, I should be able to do two years here, then transfer junior year. Then we could..." My words trailed off at the look on his face. The shift in him was instant. It felt like the air around us dropped fifty degrees.

Reno's eyes narrowed, leaving nothing but black. His hands released me, and he took a deliberate step back, creating a void a mile wide between us.

Hard eyes met mine, his face wiped bare of emotion. "You got in?"

Head pressed back into the wall, I nodded mutely.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I've been... thinking it over," I said, stumbling over the words.

His thumbs met his hips and his head angled away from me as he stared out over the pool. The usual noises rang out—splashing, screaming, laughing. They faded to background noise, nothing but a backdrop to the rush of blood ringing in my ears. When he came back to me, it was like invasion of the body snatchers. He was a completely different person.

"Go to college," he said, emotionless.

"Why?" I demanded, suddenly feeling the force of a week's worth of repressed feelings working their way up my body, looking for an outlet.

"You know why," he said, his voice firm.

My head swayed side to side. "For argument's sake, let's say I don't. Enlighten me." I could feel my fists clench, every suppressed emotion pushing and shoving, like an angry mob. I needed him now. I needed him not to freak out, because I was about to fall apart.

Sharp eyes cut to mine. "Don't change plans for me, Riley. We never banked on this being anything more than it is."

My hands landed on my hips, trembling with emotion. "And what is it? Fucking?" I spat the word. Threw it at him. "You still trying to pass this off as just sex?" I lifted my hands, bending the tips of my fingers to mimic inverted commas.

My building ire only seemed to incite his. Looming over me, he raised his own voice. "You can't stay here for this."

Fighting the urge to shrink, I pulled up to my full height and locked him in my hard stare. "I never said it was about you," I said, and rejoiced at the shock that registered in his eyes. "But ask yourself if you want me to go... really ask yourself."

His shoulders pulled back, the tendons in his neck straining. He didn't like his answer. "This wasn't a long-term thing, Ri, I told you that. Did I not fucking say that? I thought you understood."

I snorted a breath, shaking my head in disbelief. "Oh, I did. I understood that you were too afraid to put labels on us. That you didn't want to admit that this was anything more than sex because you're scared of getting hurt—"

"I'm not fucking scared!" he bellowed. "Dammit, Riley. We're friends who fuck, nothing more, nothing less. Don't blame me if you've read too much into it. I never fucking misled you. Never made you any promises."

Pain radiated through my chest. "This is more than sex, and you know it."

"It's not."

My heart was breaking, I could feel it. The anger gave way to agony, and it burned a path down my throat.

"Well, it feels like it."

His head tilted, gaze cool. "How would you know any different?"

My breaths faltered. My head shook. "Don't do that, Ren. Don't be cruel."

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"You've only been with me," he said, detached, and I faltered, my conviction wavering. "How would you know the difference? You've convinced yourself it means something because you let me inside you. You wouldn't be the first or the last."

Nausea surged, and with it came a swift reminder of the baby. God. It took everything I had to remain standing. Head spinning, my eyes struggled to focus.

"So that's it... I'm just another screw to you? You would know, right? You've fucked enough people. I'm just one on a long list. Another convenient place to stick your dick?"

"Riley, don't." His eyes flashed and his jaw contracted, his careful mask slipping a fraction. That, at least, stirred some emotion.

My limbs locked in position, holding me up when all I wanted to do was sink to the ground. I met his gaze. There was just one more thing I needed from him. One thing and then I'd slam the goddamn door on us forever.

"Say it. I want to hear you say it."

"Don't fucking push me, Riley." His fists pulsed at his sides, but his voice almost pleaded with me to back off.

"Why?" I cried, my tone desperate. I'd done everything. I had nothing left. It was too much. I just needed him to say it. "It shouldn't be that hard! This means nothing to you. So, say you don't fucking love me anymore!"

I'd noticed a while ago that our raised voices had drawn attention. Now I was screaming, and an obvious hush had descended. People weren't even pretending not to watch the drama unfold. But the absolute worst part of it was that Raya hovered in my periphery, her arms folded and a triumphant smirk slashed across her face. Add humiliation to the rest of the crap being piled on top of me.

"You keep coming back to that like it means something," Reno said through clenched teeth.

"God, just say it," I begged. A tear escaped, running down my face. One fucking thing. That's all I wanted from him.

Reno swallowed hard. His tormented eyes followed the path of that lone tear, and his hands flexed by his sides. He said his words slowly. "This was about sex, Riley. Love doesn't come into it. Love can't come into it. I'm not willing to sit around waiting for everything to go to shit. Because that's what love does. It leaves you wide open... holding a ticking fucking time bomb."

Another tear fell as anguish filled me. "You're wrong, Ren. So damn wrong. You won't be better off for never letting anyone in. I wish you could see that."

"It's just sex."

I knew I was at risk of pushing him too hard, but this was unsalvageable. It was already over. Now it was just about how it ended.

I whispered, "Prove it."

And he did.

Right as Liss came running from the house, Leon hot on her heels, Reno's gaze swung wildly around him, landing on the one person I hadn't banked on. It took him less than two strides to reach her... and half a second for him to shatter my heart

into a million pieces. Reno smashed his lips down on Raya's. And he kissed her. Right there in front of me.

Eighteen years, he'd never kissed another person.

I didn't know I was moving back until my body knocked into people clumsily. Disoriented, I stumbled through the bodies, needing away. Needing far, far fucking away. Blinded by tears, I pushed and shouldered my way through the crowd, chest caving, stomach heaving. My head spun. It was too much.

"You fucking asshole!" I heard Liss' livid scream.

"The fuck are you doing?" Leon roared.

My feet kept moving.

"Fuck!" Reno bellowed, frantic. "Fuck! Riley? Riley!"

Leon and Liss' combined shouts mingled into one big mess of noise. The crowd railed, collective reactions pinging around. But it was his voice I couldn't drown out.

"Riley!"

His shouts grew louder. Nearer. I fought my way to the side gate and my fingers stabbed at the latch, working furiously to get it open. Just as it popped, a hand wrapped around my bicep.

"Wait!"

Something snapped. I wrenched my arm from his hold, whirling to face him. "No!"

I struggled in his hold.

"Wait, okay? Just fucking... wait, please," he beseeched me, his eyes begging. "I didn't... fuck! I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry, Riley. I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Voice hard, I cut him off with a murmured, "Yeah, you did. I got too close. I factored you into my plans. For a second there, I might even have made you happy. But you don't

want that." I marvelled at the fact my voice didn't shake, that I didn't simply break down into little pieces at his feet. Holding his gaze, chin up, I said, "Don't worry. I get it now."

"I didn't fucking say it," he said urgently, panicked eyes blazing, his voice fevered.

I steeled myself. "Then you got what you wanted all along... for me to hate you enough that you wouldn't have to."

His head dropped, his grip tightening where he held onto me. "Riley. Let me make this right. I swear I'll fucking make this right."

Easing out of his hold, I took a step back, then another. "Goodbye, Maddox."

He let me go. I caught sight of Leon's fist connecting with Reno's face as I turned.

I made it four steps through the gate, out of sight, before my body folded. Liss was there to hold me up, and I sobbed into her shoulder, like the baby I didn't know what the hell to do about.

Thirty-Nine

Riley

A week to the day I'd found out, and I still hadn't scheduled a visit to the doctor.

I couldn't bring myself to. I knew I should, but I was still reeling from the events of the weekend, and this was a problem I couldn't see a solution for. Whatever I did, though, I'd be doing it alone. And I just... couldn't. If I didn't acknowledge it, then it wasn't happening. But, as Liss had gently reminded me, this wasn't a situation I could ignore for much longer. I had decisions to make. The thought of those decisions kept me awake at night, my mind screaming and heart beat thundering. The thought of those decisions stabbed at my chest and twisted my insides.

I knew I had options. Options that would make the problem go away. Make it like it never happened. And that's what I wanted, right? So why did every cell in my body violently reject the mere idea of that? Abortion, adoption... the words hit me like a round of bullets to the heart.

"Did you think any more about...?" Liss asked, voice low enough so only I could hear. Her head tipped closer to mine, but her uncharacteristically serious eyes surveyed the chaotic room around us like an undercover agent, ensuring nobody pried.

My eyes slid closed before her soft question hit my ears. It was the most hideous of all catch-22s. I couldn't bring myself to explore the alternatives, but I couldn't be a mother at this point in my life either. How could I figure out what to do? Kids were some arbitrary thought, an assumed part of my future. Something I hadn't considered but

would probably want when I could provide them with the security and stability all children deserved. As a bare minimum, I'd want a home, an income... oh, and a father who wanted to stick around for longer than the three minutes it took to conceive the kid. I had none of those things.

The choice should have been simple. I was seventeen, still in high school, lived with my strip club dancer mom in a single wide trailer with one bedroom... and Reno didn't want a future with me. On paper, there was no decision. Write it down fifteen different ways, backward, forward, front and back. The sensible choice would be as plain as the ink markings on the sheet. Yet I found myself wracked with doubt, so much I struggled to think straight.

Staring ahead through weary eyes, I tried so damn hard to resist, but my rebellious gaze strayed, anyway. Reno's unmistakable form appeared in my peripheral, blurred and distant, from across the cafeteria. He'd had the decency to maintain a distance from Raya this lunchtime. The pain he'd inflicted weighed down on my chest like a physical presence. But I'd brought this all on myself. He'd made it clear on numerous occasions. He couldn't let me all the way in, couldn't allow himself to believe we might have a future. And why would he? All he'd known was loss. How could he expect to hold on to anything? It was my own stupid fault if I'd refused to hear it. I couldn't tell him now.

"Come on, Ri." Applying a little pressure, Liss encouraged me up from the table. Collecting our trash and stacking it on the tray with one hand, she kept the other firmly wrapped around me. I felt redundant as I stood by and watched her transporting the trays. I should have offered to help, but my mind felt spongy and vacant, like it took at least ten seconds longer than normal to process and react, and then my limbs didn't seem eager to respond to my delayed, lackluster commands anyway. So, I let Liss take over, allowed her to guide me out of the cafeteria.

As if acting separate from my brain, my eyes trailed back to the place I'd deemed off limits. To Reno. And just before the cafeteria doors whooshed closed, our gazes clashed. My body stiffened and my chest constricted. My entire world narrowed to the endless brown eyes piercing through me. They were a riot of shame and sorrow, pain and regret. It was almost too much to look at. Time seemed to stand still as we stared at one another. Each beat of my heart slowed, thudding loudly against the inside of my skull, and reverberating around my body. Then the doors snapped together, breaking our connection.

My body swayed and my breath burst from my lungs in a sharp gasp. Liss tightened her grip and propelled us forward, ducking into the bathroom and sitting me down.

"Talk to me, Ri." Eyes brimming with sympathy and concern scanned my face from a crouched position in front of where I sat hunched on the closed toilet seat.

My lips rolled together, the heavy thuds of my heart still echoing around in my head. It felt like I was breaking into pieces. Like I was a box labelled fragile, but some sadistic person just wouldn't quit shaking me. Any more strain, I'd split right down the middle.

"I don't know what to do," I finally whispered, raw emotion smothering my voice. "It's all so messed up. Part of me thinks I should call the clinic and make a damn appointment to... you know... just get it over with. It could all be over. But the rest of me can't stomach the thought of that."

Her slim hand covered my trembling one. "That's understandable, Ri."

"Is it?"

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Her silky hair glided over her shoulders with the motion of her emphatic nod. "It is. There's no easy decision."

"What am I supposed to do? Have a baby with no job, no home, and no father? I shouldn't even be considering it." The words came out unpractised, but their implication shocked me. And Liss. The sharp rise of her eyebrows attested to that, even if she masked it completely a fraction of a second later.

Tone gentle, she probed softly. "And is that what you're doing? Considering it?"

Was I? I couldn't be. I hadn't allowed it before now, but I loosened the reins and let my thoughts wander to the possibility, my hand dropping to my middle. As my fingers loosely trailed across my stomach, I allowed the idea to take root, imagined a tiny face and ten fingers, ten toes.

A steel shutter slammed down almost instantly. But I could feel the emotions ramming the barrier, demanding entry, refusing to allow me to hold them back for much longer. I had to hold them off. I needed to focus on the practicalities of my predicament. I couldn't go painting a fairy tale version of my future. Life didn't work like that. Reality was always waiting for that chance to come crashing down, and when it did, it hit with the brutal force of a tsunami.

Head lifting, I squared my shoulders. "I just wish I hadn't gotten into this mess."

But the words rang untrue. Because now that I was in the mess, I couldn't seem to bring myself to undo it.

Liss was careful not to push, but when another day passed and my head remained firmly in the sand, she cautioned me that the longer this went on, the more difficult it would be. Couldn't be any worse than the prospect of facing it right now, so...

Munching quietly on a slice of toast in the darkened room, my mom snoring lightly on the pull-out sofa after her late finish from the club, a cramping started low in my pelvis. My brow creased and my hand stilled, the half-eaten slice suspended in mid-air. The pain intensified slightly, spreading, and then lessened to a dull ache. Dropping my breakfast onto the plate, I wiped my hands together, sending crumbs flying. Rising to my feet, I paced the narrow walkway between the kitchenette and my bedroom, figuring the motion would ease my discomfort slightly. It did. A few minutes later, Liss honked. The noise had no effect on my mother, who's body stretched to each corner of the bed, like a starfish, her mouth open wide. She even slept like a child. Grabbing my backpack, I dragged my listless

body to Liss' car.

The only expression Liss wore these days was concerned: furrowed head, knitted brows. Today, it had intensified.

"You okay?" she asked, worry evident in her tone.

"Huh?" I blinked, the low ache starting back up. I felt myself grimace.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I offered her a tight smile. "Just ate something that didn't agree with me, I think."

"You sure? We should see a doctor."

My head jerked side to side as I clamped my teeth together. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fi—"

"I am," I cut her off harshly, then released a long breath. Softening my tone, I met her gaze. "I really am."

Unconvinced, she kept her eyes on me a while longer, her teeth coming out to nip her lower lip. I tried to widen my smile. I probably missed the mark.

By lunch, the pain and cramping had gotten worse. I'd told Liss I had to stay behind to discuss something with the teacher, but I spent the whole forty-five minutes in the

bathroom, folded over on the closed lid of the toilet. Fear gripped me. It was palpable, like a heavy cloud of black descending over and around me. I closed my hands over my ears and clamped my eyes shut, blocking it out, breathing through the pain. When the bell rang, I rose on unsteady legs, but the world tilted around me, throwing me off balance. My hands shot out to prevent my fall, and I fought through a wave of dizziness. I'd eaten two bites of toast since last night. I should eat better. I vowed to do better. Once the wooziness subsided enough, I pushed through the door and made my way to class.

Liss was in my next class. She'd know something was up as soon as she set eyes on me. But if I didn't go, she'd know something was up, anyway. Plus, she was my ride. There was no avoiding her. I pulled up short just outside the classroom, inhaling raggedly as I leaned into the wall, resting my palm against the surface. Something hurt. And it didn't feel right.

"Whoa! Is it shark week, Riley?" a loud voice goaded from behind.

"What?" I mumbled, my head craning round.

Jackson Bateman appeared in front of me, gnashing his teeth together with a hand pointed up above his head. "Shark week? You know—"

"Riley! Oh my god!" Liss' hands grasped my shoulders, spinning me to face her. The motion was too fast for my vision to catch up, and nausea built. "We need to go."

"What?" I heard myself say again.

"Oh, fuck off, Jackson!" Liss shrieked. He stopped circling us.

"What the fuck's going on?"

My body seized, every muscle tensing at the sound of Reno's voice. I didn't look up. Couldn't. A wave of pain bent me in half and a low moan escaped my lips.

The baby.

"No!" I cried weakly, clutching my stomach. I knew why I couldn't make that appointment. I didn't want to. I'd known all along. I just hadn't been able to admit it. I would now. I promise I would.

Please don't undo it.

"Bleeding? What the fuck do you...?" Reno's bewildered voice trailed off as he twisted to peer around me. When he spoke again, there was a quiet desperation about his tone that broke me. "Like period bleeding?"

I could almost see Liss' dilemma, see her biting at her nails and clutching at straws that just kept evading her grasp.

"No, like she's losing your baby bleeding, Reno."

My heart crashed to the floor at the same time as my body.

Forty

Reno

"Like she's losing your baby bleeding, Reno."

Liss' words slammed into me like an axe to the head. Every thought suspended—except that one. Riley's body sagged in my loosened grip, hitting the deck before I could react. My brain felt like it fucking short circuited as I dropped to my knees and wrapped my arms under her, hauling her small body up against my chest. I took off running. A terror I hadn't known existed gripped every part of me as that one sentence echoed in my head.

Losing your baby. What the fuck?

Losing your baby...

It just kept going around and around.

Losing your baby.

Baby. What fucking baby?

With Riley's body crushed against mine, I sped like a bullet through the halls. I could hear Liss a few paces behind, struggling to keep up.

"I've called nine-one-one," she huffed over my shoulder.

I nodded, gritting my teeth. So many fucking questions. But I couldn't find any words. I glanced down, my eyes drawn to the patch of red coloring Riley's shorts. My gut heaved.

Fuck.

Fuck!

Jaw straining, I tightened my arms around her. Words finally came. "She's pregnant?"

"Yes."

My lids slid closed, body suddenly feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds.

Pregnant.

Riley was pregnant. Shaking my head clear of the thousand thoughts screaming for attention, I had to tamp down the urge to slam a fist into the wall. My hands were full, otherwise I'd have my arm buried through the drywall up to my bicep. I couldn't fucking make sense of it. This was my fucking fault, though, my responsibility; I'd caused this.

Her chin lifted, defensive. "She didn't know. Not the entire time. She just found out."

Heart slamming against my rib cage with the force of a fucking baseball bat, I glared down at her. But it wasn't her I was mad at. And it definitely wasn't Riley.

"How long has she known?"

She glanced away, tipping up a shoulder. "Just over a week."

Over a week. My breath shot out in a rush. Awareness dawned like a lead weight, forcing my eyes closed as revulsion worked its way through me. "Your party...?"

"Yeah," she confirmed, eyes hard, tone harder.

Riley had known she was pregnant with my baby when I'd told her we had no future together. When I'd kissed Raya in front of her face to really drive home the point. Pain like nothing I'd experienced before lanced through me, followed by a magnitude of shame that damn near buried me. My head fucking throbbed.

I'd regretted it, with every goddamn fibre of my being, the instant I'd done it. If I could undo any of the shit that had happened these past few months, I'd undo that. The look on Riley's face would fucking haunt me for the rest of my days. When she'd walked away, I'd welcomed Leon's fist. Took it like the prick I was. I'd destroyed her. Decimated her.

And all the while, she'd been carrying my baby. Bile hit the back of my throat.

And now... she was probably losing it.

Despair. Pure fucking despair—the kind I'd sworn never to experience again. My feet were moving, pounding along the long corridors as the red patch grew wider, and blood trickled down Riley's thigh.

I knew I was already too late.

It turned out you could lose something, even when you thought you had nothing to lose. It hurt just the same. And apparently... you could love something you didn't even know existed. Didn't even know was yours. Boxing your emotions, putting a lid on them an

d shoving them down to the deepest part of you, didn't do shit. They were still there. What I felt for Riley wasn't something I could control or prevent. And the baby...

I rubbed my palm over my chest.

Riley miscarried. Eleven weeks. I'd given no thought to babies. Not one. Never contemplated the idea. They'd been nowhere on my radar. If someone had asked me if kids were a part of my future, the answer would have been no, especially after Brett and O.

Given the choice a few hours ago... I wouldn't have hesitated to say yes. Maybe it was because by the time I knew, it was too late. Maybe it was guilt, and that baby would have given me the chance to make up for what I'd done. Maybe it was the fact that it would have taken the choice out of my hands... I would never have been able to let Riley go if she had my baby. And maybe... I didn't want to let her go. I never did. I knew it now. I knew just how much I needed her in my life, but she was so far fucking gone, I'd never be able to reach her. She might as well be untouchable.

Sitting in the dark on the worn sofa in my empty trailer, I couldn't clear my head of all the things that could have been. A tiny blonde haired, green-eyed baby girl or a boy with dark hair and eyes, cradled in Riley's arms. It was fucking stupid. Christ, I couldn't keep Riley in my life without destroying her. But I grieved the loss of that baby, my flesh and blood, the way I grieved everyone else I'd lost. And just like them, I wanted it back. I wanted another fucking chance.

When my lids squeezed tight, a bead of moisture escaped. I let my head fall back. Then I let them all fucking fall.

And then, I drowned my sorrows in a bottle, falling asleep where I sat and waking with that same feeling of despondency strapped to my chest. Showering quickly, I made my way across the park, my limbs like dead weights.

I rapped my knuckles lightly against the door twice and stepped back, head bowed.

It creaked open a few inches before Riley's mom peered around the edge. "Oh, Maddox. Hi."

Amy Mason was the least motherly looking woman I'd met. She appeared barely older than her daughter with her tiny frame, wide green eyes, bouncy blonde hair, and breasts that were massively too big for her body. Riley's mom was a source of aggravation for her, but whenever she complained about something she'd done, it was with a glint in her eye, like she had to say it to get it off her chest but deep down it didn't really bother her. They might be polar opposites, and Amy might have some fucked up ideas on acceptable parenting, but they loved each other. And the pain and sadness in Amy's red-rimmed eyes proved that.

Shoulders hunched, I inclined my head toward the room beyond the door. "She in?" I winced at my words. Where else would she be, fucker? She had a miscarriage yesterday.

"Uh." Amy hesitated, catching her lip in her teeth and looking over her shoulder into the dim interior. When her head came back, she looked surer and older—more like a mom—than I'd ever seen her before. The fierce protectiveness in her eyes surprised me. "I'll let you in, Maddox, because I know this affects you, too, and I think you two need to talk. But do or say anything to upset my daughter and I'll haul you out of here myself."

My head nodded in agreement and I held her solemn gaze. "I won't."

She sounded bone weary, like she'd just finished walking a thousand miles and I'd come in and asked her to walk back again. She kept her eyes fixated on her fingers as they tugged at loose threads on the strings of her hoody. I felt fucking helpless. I knew why I was here, but everything I thought I wanted to say sounded pointless now. I scrubbed a hand down my face.

"I wish you'd told me."

A bitter laugh escaped her. Still, she didn't look up. "Why?"

Right. I looked down. What had I done over the past few weeks to give her the impression she could come to me with this? I'd spent months pushing her away, trying to convince myself, and her, it was for the best. I was a fucking idiot. There was nothing better than Riley. I should have fucking grabbed on to her with both hands and never let go. My fists clenched and unclenched on my thighs. I cracked my knuckles. Fuck, I despised myself.

"I know, but... I would have wanted to know. I wish you'd felt like you could tell me. I'm sorry you didn't." There was a gruffness to my words that couldn't be concealed.

She nodded absently, her fingernails raking the threads.

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" She said the words quietly, casually even. But her wide, green eyes strayed to mine. And those eyes were awash with pain and unshed tears. They practically begged someone to take away the hurt. I moved instinctively. Closing the distance between us, I tugged her into my chest and cradled her head in my palm.

Her hands gripped my shirt as her tears dampened the fabric, her pained sobs muffled against my body. I clutched her tighter, my heart cracking as I dropped my lips to her hair and planted a long kiss there. I inhaled raggedly as my own eyes closed, fighting desperately to stay in control of the emotions battering me. She needed me to be strong. I fucking owed her that much.

"It's all my fault," she cried into my chest. "I wished it would go away. And it did. It's all my fault."

I gripped her cheeks in my hands and focused my narrowed gaze on her tear-soaked face. "No, Riley. You didn't cause it. Nothing you said or did was to blame. It was just one of those things."

Her head swung hopelessly from side to side. "No. It was me. I didn't even see a doctor. I didn't take care of it. I didn't protect it. It was my baby, and all I ever did was wish it away."

I didn't know what to say to convince her. She'd already sentenced herself, and it fucking broke me. Her eyelids clamped together, her head shaking slower now, but her movements were despondent.

"I didn't mean it. I didn't realize that until it was too late, but... I didn't mean it."

My gaze locked on hers, and a strange feeling erupted in my chest. "Were you..." I cleared my throat. "What were you going to do?"

She looked away. "I hadn't decided. I knew it was stupid and crazy. But every time I thought about not having it, it just... it broke my heart. I couldn't do it."

I pressed my lips to her wet ones without stopping to think about the consequences. I just held them there, against her warm skin, salty with her tears, while I cupped her face in my hands and inhaled roughly through my nose.

She'd have kept it.

She would have had the baby.

It would have been fucking idiotic, dumbest shit we'd ever done... but I would have wanted her to.

Something in my chest splintered. Pain radiated from the spot, like a giant fist had reached inside and smashed everything up. Every-fucking-thing hurt.

“Sorry, Riley. I’m so damn sorry,” I said against her lips. “If I’d known...”

I felt her stiffen, her body locking up. She shut down, pulling away from me and settling back into her previous position: fingers on the strings and gaze trained ahead. I watched her retreat right before my eyes, and I couldn’t fucking blame her. Not after what I’d done. What she’d been through.

“It doesn’t matter now,” she repeated, in that same tone.

I had no idea why the fuck I pushed it when I should have kept my mouth shut, but I needed her to hear it.

“I would have wanted you to keep it, Riley.”

A wave of grief rolled over her. Her pale face crumpled, and her body folded over, small shoulders shaking.

I stood stiffly, my arms tight by my sides, my fingers stretching and contracting like they didn’t have a fucking clue what to do. They echoed my thoughts. I didn’t know how to make any of this right. My throat had to work to get words out.

“I’m sorry.”

It was all I had. All I could offer her. It was fucking nothing.

Without looking at me, she murmured, “So am I.”

They were so damn soft, her words, but they cut like a blade.