

## Read Untouchable (Unstoppable 1) by Danielle Hill

Chapter 41-43

Forty-One

Riley

April came and went. A couple of weeks after I lost the baby, I'd made the decision to go away to college. I needed a fresh start. Somewhere my heart wouldn't break every time I turned around. Somewhere pain didn't cling to me like a shadow. I didn't know if that place existed, if I could ever even escape the demons that plagued me, but I knew I'd stand a better chance if I didn't have to worry about seeing Reno every day. If every little thing didn't remind me of how much I'd lost.

He'd tried approaching me twice at school after I'd gone back. I'd bolted both times. My mom was under strict instructions not to let him in and she'd listened, for a change, turning him away when he'd dropped by. It was crazy, but it seemed like she'd done some growing up. She'd reduced her nights at the club to four a week. On the nights she was home, we'd pull out the bed, smother ourselves in the comforter and watch movies until we fell asleep. She'd been there. When I'd really needed her, she'd stepped up. She'd been my mom. I felt the tears well, and I gave myself a little shake, sniffing as I held the dark sweater to my nose.

My chest tightened. It still had a faint smell of him.

I shouldn't bring

it.

He'd called a few times and texted. I'd ignored the calls, deleted the messages. Then I'd blocked his number. If I saw him out, I ducked and turned the other way. What could we even say to each other? What was left to say?

Graduation passed in a blur, same with summer, which was now drawing to a close.

He drove by today, slowing, like usual, as he passed my trailer. I wish I could say my heart didn't skip a beat at the sight of him, that my pulse didn't sky-rocket, and my mind didn't scream at me to go to him. They still did. They always did. I loved him. Maybe I always would. But I got it now. He had been right all along. Love would always leave you weak, leave you open to pain.

My hand still settled over my stomach sometimes. The regret and sorrow felt like they might drown me some days. I didn't know if kids were in my future, but I knew I'd never, ever forgive myself for not taking care of something so precious, for failing to see it as

the blessing it was. Everyone told me it wasn't my fault. All I knew was I did nothing to prevent it from happening. Nothing.

He would have wanted it.

I squashed the stray thought like a buzzing fly, swiftly and efficiently. I couldn't let myself dwell on anything he said after the fact. It was easy for him to say that, knowing it wasn't a real possibility. Easy to offer his support when it was no longer needed. Who knew how he might have reacted if I'd told him earlier? But if I knew anything, it was how pointless it was to dwell on the what ifs. God, if I started, I'd never stop. I was looking forward now. I had to look forward.

"You're not taking that!" Liss snatched the sweater from my hand.

I glanced up. My best friend sat on the edge of my bed, legs crossed over one another, as she vetoed pretty much every item I tried to pack in my case.

"Is there anything I can take?" I teased, brows up as I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Sure." She shrugged, the motion sending the thin material of her oversized shirt down her arm. "But not that."

I smiled, lowering my gaze. "So, Leon dropped by yesterday."

Her head shot up, a gentle warning flaring in her gaze. "Don't."

I raised both palms. "I know, I know... but he asked about you."

I didn't miss the way her fingers fumbled anxiously with the frayed threads on her ripped jeans. "Still... don't."

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"Okay," I agreed. She had confided nothing else about Leon. On the night of her party, they'd both disappeared upstairs—information I'd gleaned from Danny—and were no doubt interrupted by the noise from mine and Reno's showdown. Liss had remained steadfastly tight-lipped every time I'd asked her, insisting nothing had happened, and nothing would happen. Despite my protests, whatever had been going on had ended. I'd asked if it was because of me. She'd said no, but I wasn't so sure.

Liss had been a rock. Someone I could always depend on. She would be my friend until the day I died; I was sure of that. But tomorrow, we were going our separate ways. Me to Georgia, and Liss to Florida. It wasn't the biggest of distances, but for the past nine years, she'd never been more than a five-minute drive away, and I knew I would miss her like crazy.

The next couple of hours passed in a blur of laughter, tears, reminiscing, and eating our weight in junk food. I tugged closed the zipper on the last case and leaned back on my knees, hands dropping flat onto my thighs.

Liss reached out a hand and snagged my ponytail, giving it a little tug. "Is that you all packed?"

I nodded, lips pressed into a flat line. "And you're all set, yeah?" I asked, struggling to keep my voice steady.

Her blue eyes welled. Shaking her head with a groan, she nodded and swiped at her cheeks. "Yep. You know me, no fuss!"

I laughed through my tears. And then smothered her to near death. "I love you, Lissy."

Her head bobbed. "You too, amigo." She pulled back, lashes wet. "Man, I'm gonna miss the shit out of you!"

We both cracked up. "Same."

My mom hugged me as we waved and hollered our goodbyes until Liss' tail lights disappeared out of sight.

As I stood, arms wrapped around my body with my back to the other side of the park, my head and heart were at loggerheads. One trying to force me inside, the other trying to force my gaze behind me. My head won out, and I inhaled through my nose as I moved through the door, closing it with a gentle thud and placing my forehead onto it.

But thoughts of him kept me awake, pain blooming in the hollow space behind my ribs, and moisture collecting in the corners of my eyes. Even if I couldn't speak to him when I was here, I knew where to find him. I knew he was close by. After tomorrow, I didn't know how long it would be before I saw him again. Shifting to my side, I squeezed my knees up, tugging them into my chest. A few seconds later, I reached under my pillow and slid the sweater from beneath it. With his scent pressed to my face, the soft fabric bunched under my cheek, my lids slid closed.

"This must be the last of it," my mom huffed, between pants, as she hefted an overloaded case to the trunk of her car. My car now. The same one that I planned to

drive three hours in today and hopefully not die. We both struggled to lift the case up, my mom's inappropriate footwear not helping matters.

"Here... let me."

His deep voice floated over me like a caress, but every muscle in my body tensed, quickly jumping to high alert. My mom's head craned back, wide eyes staring over my shoulder. I felt his presence like an extension of myself, but I didn't turn.

Leaning around me, his fingers wrapped around the handle. My eyes zeroed in on his forearm, to the muscle flexing and popping as he lifted the case with ease, before they dipped to his sneakers and stayed there.

My mom wiped her palms on her thighs then shuffled backward. "I'll give you two a minute."

The breath that had wedged somewhere in my throat filtered out slowly through pursed lips, and my heart rate escalated to dangerous levels, each heavy thud shaking my entire body.

"Hey," he said.

Turning hesitantly, I kept my head lowered until the last possible second. When I looked up, the impact was reminiscent of a mack truck slamming into my chest. I jerked backward, catching myself before I stumbled. Trying to regain my composure as best as I could, I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth and rubbed my hands up and down my arms.

"Hi," I whispered.

His eyes sought mine, forging a connection I immediately knew I was unprepared for. They were too intense, too open... and I felt too exposed. I shifted my gaze to rest just to the side of his head. I saw him frown. Pushing his hands into his pockets, he rolled back on his heels a little, dropping back down with a subtle thud.

His head tipped toward the car. "You all packed?"

I couldn't look directly at him, but I couldn't tear my gaze away either. Gnawing on my lip, my hands tight around my sides, I nodded.

He did the same, a few slow bobs with his head dipped. Bringing it up again, he asked, "When do you leave?"

Glancing away, I inhaled a heavy breath and willed my erratic heart to settle. I turned back to him, my brows low and my eyes squinted against the morning sunshine.

“About ten minutes.”

Emotions registered on his face like waves crashing against the shore, ebbing and flowing, shifting and changing. He was quiet. So quiet it felt like the silence might suffocate me. My foot tapped, stomach churning. Standing here with him, like this, with the past swirling around us, was overwhelming. I couldn't stop my body from trembling.

“Was there something else you needed, Ren?”

His head came up. “No. Just came to say goodbye, Ri.”

“Riley?” he said with an urgency to his voice. “I hope like fucking hell you have the time of your life down there. I hope it's everything you want it to be... because you deserve it all. Every. Fucking. Thing. And I'm so fucking sorry I couldn't be the one to give it to you.” His breathless words were fierce, blowing me away and breathing life into a heart that needed to remain dormant.

“Ren...” His name broke from my lips on a hopeless cry. I stepped into him without thinking and his arms opened to receive me. Dropping my forehead onto his chest, my eyes closed tightly. I wrapped myself around him and inhaled, thankful I'd tucked the sweater into my case at the last minute despite the million reasons not to. “Thank you,” I whispered.

His chin dipped to rest on top of my head, and he released a long sigh.

“For what it's worth, Riley, I never would have said it.” His lips pressed into my hair, hands squeezing my arms for a beat before he backed up, detaching our bodies. His brown eyes glistened when he looked down at me, reaching to tuck an errant hair behind my ear. A sad but beautiful smile tugged up one corner of his lips. “I love you... won't ever be able to say otherwise.”

Nodding through my tears, I watched him walk away, knowing that the look on his face and the truth in his words would stay with me always.

Forty-Two

Riley

Ten Months Later

“You're back!” Liss squealed, rounding my car and throwing the door open before I'd shifted into park.

Securing the car—instead of leaving it in gear and chasing it as it rolled down the street, which had not happened to me last year—I hopped out and tossed my arms around her, laughing. It had been less than three months since I'd visited her for spring break, but it still felt way too long. And it seemed different now that both of us had returned home for the summer.

I'd come home over the holidays, staying three days total over Christmas, before heading back with my mom. I hadn't left the trailer once in those three days. That was the only time I'd returned home in ten months. My mom had come back to Atlanta with me for New Years.

At school, I could almost convince myself I was just another new student. Fresh-faced, baggage-free, and looking forward to the promise of the future spread out before me. I'd played the part; I hadn't held back. I'd partied hard, studied hard, thrown myself into the whole college experience with a passion borne of trying to outrun my past. Somehow, it still felt hollow.

The first couple of months, thoughts of Reno, of what I'd lost, plagued me every day. In a sea of pulsing bodies moving to the beat, a lecture hall filled with students taking notes, suddenly he'd be there. Creeping up on me without warning and stealing the breath from my lungs. Over time, it became less. I could go a few days without slipping, but the second my thoughts turned to him, it was as if he'd never left them. He occupied so much space in my head that flipping the switch was like cutting clean through a water pipe. He emerged in a burst, not a trickle. It was hard to contain him. I imagined taking him, our past, and the memories that had the power to incapacitate me and seriously derail my new life, and stuffing them into a closet then padlocking the doors.

Being back here was like throwing those doors open without reservation. Emotions I'd foolishly believed I had a handle on assailed me from all sides.

My arms tightened around Liss and she squeezed me right back, as if she knew.

"Come on, get your shit," she said, leaning back to look at me, her perceptive gaze resting on my face.

I nodded, following her to the trunk, but my gaze strayed over my shoulder, searching without instruction. I couldn't see him. But he was everywhere here. Pulling my focus back, I popped the trunk and lugged my bags to the trailer. My mom stood, all glassy-eyed, watching me approach from her position propped against the door. As I neared, I tossed the bags down and she lifted her arms, wrapping them tight around my middle.

"My baby," she crooned, contentment ringing in her voice.

"Hi, Mom," I breathed back, allowing her presence to soothe me.

It lasted a few seconds, this quiet reuniting, and then we separated, apart from the small hand that wrapped around mine and didn't seem in any hurry to let go.

"Your mom met a guy!" Liss announced as she booted the half-open door and dumped my bags on the floor.

I looked at my mom, my brows lowered. "And I somehow haven't heard about his hands, penis size, or preferred sexual position already?" Pink spots appeared on her cheeks and she averted her gaze with a coy smile. Coy? My mother... coy?

"Mom?" I said, the word dripping with disbelief.

She shrugged, tapping her fingers on the countertop.

"She likes him, Ri. Not just his body... him," Liss said, before adding, "I overheard her on the phone. It was so damn cute."

I gasped, my wide eyes resting on my mom's flushed face. "Is this true?"

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Suddenly all action, she started moving pots and pans around, opening doors randomly and closing them again.

"Oh, no," I said, "I've had to listen to stories about the Marshalls of this world and the goddamn wonder of their magic hands, so don't even think about going shy on me now! You met someone?"

"Fine!" She threw up her hands, tossing down the dishcloth she'd picked up for no reason other than to avoid this conversation. "I met a guy, he's... well, he's super sweet, and bald," she added quickly, her teeth nibbling her lip nervously, as if I'd judge her for dating a hairless man. "He's older, mid-fifties, and not what you'd describe as conventionally good looking—"

"Mom," I cut her off, "I don't care if he's the Hunchback of Notre Dame... if he makes you happy, that's all that matters."

Her face softened, head lowering until a curtain of hair swept forward, obscuring half of the face I now noticed was glowing. "He does, Riley, hon. He really does."



My gaze flicked to Liss, who stood inside the door, arms over her chest, watching us with a sappy smile on her face. Eyes traveling back to my mom, I swallowed over the lump of emotion. "I'm happy for you, Mom."

Her smile transformed her heart-shaped face, "Thank you, honey."

"There's a welcome back party tonight, Ri," Liss said cautiously. "We can go... or stay or... whatever."

This was home. It always would be. Wherever I ended up, this would always be the place I came back to. And Reno would always be here. I'd have to find a way to deal with that.

"We can go."

Liss smiled, like she was proud of me. I rolled my eyes as I strolled by her, but I gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

Trepidation built as the evening drew in. I caught Liss watching me a few times, and rolled my shoulders, coaxing myself to relax as I flashed her my best carefree smile. I could tell she wasn't sure, and in the end, it was me who dragged her butt out of the trailer.

I'd spent countless warm summer nights in an open field, surrounding a roaring bonfire. Images of nights just like this one came flooding back, bombarding me, as I perched beside Liss on a wooden log. Reno featured in every single one. I recalled the way my heart would vault every time he looked at me. The way fireworks would erupt over my skin with the slightest touch. How the heat in his eyes would burn a fiery trail over my body. Warmth infused my cheeks and I shook my head clear, pushing the thoughts aside and focusing my full attention on Liss. We laughed and joked, shooting the shit like old times. For ten months, our lives had ventured off down different roads, but now it felt like we'd never been apart. Dusk slowly gave way to night, and the music cranked, headlights flipping on to illuminate the makeshift dance floor.

I'd be a liar if I said he hadn't been on my mind, that my eyes hadn't looked for him. A huge part of me was apprehensive about seeing him again after all this time, and I kept my guard well and truly up. Another part... I sucked in a breath, unsure what to make of it. By eleven thirty, I'd concluded he wasn't coming. Disappointment nudged me even as I gave myself permission to relax.

Of course, that's when he would show up.

I saw Leon first, almost the exact moment his eyes fell on me. The smile that split his face was enough to break hearts, and he broke into a run, heading right for me. Swooping me up in his embrace, he buried his face in my hair and swung my body from



side to side. I returned his hug with every part of me, but my eyes remained open, focused over his shoulder where his best friend stood still, watching us.

My heart rammed against Leon's chest. It didn't seem possible that Reno could look even more gorgeous. He was bigger somehow. His dark tan visible despite the fading light, and his messy brown hair had grown a little longer on top. Right now, it looked slightly tousled, like he'd run his fingers through it, and my fingers buzzed with the need to touch it. I squeezed them into a fist. With his hands stuffed inside the pockets of his dark jeans and the fabric of the gunmetal grey shirt stretched over the defined ridges and muscles of his chest, breathing became a function that no longer occurred instinctually.

"Missed you, Riley-baby!" Leon declared, spinning me round in a circle, the tips of my flats leaving the floor. I grinned, but my eyes strained to get back to Reno. I forced them into submission, looking up at Leon when he placed me on my feet and grinned down at me. "How's life been treating you, Ri? You look good." Lazy eyes scanned me from top to bottom. I blushed.

I'd grown my hair out almost to my waist. I lucked out that it liked to fall into natural beach waves without me doing much to it. Tonight, it flowed down my back freely, held back off my face with a thin band. My b cups had jumped up one size. A development that would have delighted me a few years ago—every wish from the age of twelve to sixteen had been for bigger boobs—and I'd filled out a little in the hip and butt area so I no longer resembled a r

uler. Basically, I'd grown up in every way possible over the course of the last year. I felt older, too. Like I'd earned my adult stripes.

A throat cleared beside me, interrupting Leon's perusal. He stilled, expression becoming guarded, and released me from his hold. He stepped back, turning his gaze on the source of the noise: my best friend.

"Liss," he said, voice gruff.

Hands folded over her chest, she stared at him. "Leon."

An awkward tension settled around us, and my eyes bounced from one to the other. The weirdest thing about the whole scenario was that they weren't sparring. Banter flew between them like not so friendly fire, usually. This, whatever it was, was frickin' eerie.

"How have you been?" Leon enquired, in the politest tone I'd ever heard him use.

A frown drew my eyebrows down low.

"Good," Liss nodded, eyes skittering every which way but Leon's. "You?"

What the hell...?

I'd walked into the twilight zone or something. I knew my mouth was hanging open and would look majorly unattractive, but I couldn't help it. Then it hit me.

"You had sex!" I honestly hadn't meant to blurt it, and the subjects of my statement fumbled into action; Le muttered something about a drink, and Liss' nails dug painfully into my arm.

"I'll tell you later," she said through her teeth, taking a step away. "I need a goddamn drink."

When she would have left, her steps halted, eyes locking on something—someone—behind me. I knew who it was.

Brows drawn in concern, she shifted back to me and asked, voice low, "You okay?"

I nodded. Sucking in a breath and holding it, I steeled my shoulders.

"Liss." Reno's smooth baritone drifted over my head. Every nerve reacted. The skin at the back of my neck prickled and the tiny hairs on my arms jumped to attention. Liss nodded briskly, giving my forearm a brief squeeze before striding away. She still hadn't forgiven him fully. They'd get there.

"Riley," he said. And that closet exploded open. All the pieces I'd shoved, stuffed and forced into storage, lay scattered all around me like storm debris.

Brushing the palms of my hands together, I wiped away imaginary dirt just to give them something to do. I turned to face him slowly, accepting that it had been futile to try to forget or erase him.

Reno was unforgettable.

Forty-Three

Riley

"Reno," I breathed.

When our gazes finally collided, something slipped back into place inside me. Something I'd sensed was missing but hadn't quite been able to place. Like a memory that hovered on the edge of your consciousness, but always stayed just out of reach.

Now that it was back, I couldn't fathom how I'd ever functioned in its absence. Because it was pretty fucking vital.

It felt like my heart. It felt like my soul.

And just like that, I knew I'd never fallen out of love with this boy. Self-preservation had dictated I shut it down, pretend like it never existed. I'd been a fool to think it would stay contained.

His throat worked as he swallowed, the knuckles on his closed hands glowing white in the firelight as his eyes raked over every inch of my face. He looked like he was trying to take in each facet, commit it to memory. I knew... because I was doing the same.

I could close my eyes and bring his face to mind without trying. Most days it appeared, as if it just sat behind my lids, waiting for the instant I closed my eyes. But it didn't even compare to seeing him up close after so long. My eyes took their fill with no thought of embarrassment or shame.

His head tipped, eyes burning with raw intensity. "Walk with me?" he asked, voice hoarse.

It didn't occur to me to deny him. I nodded.

We walked silently, side by side, weaving through bodies until the mass cleared, and we edged toward the treeline. Dappled moonlight sifted through the canopy of leaves overhead, illuminating our way. The noise from the party grew distant until all I could hear was the sound of my flats slapping softly against the dirt pathway and stones and gravel crunching underfoot. We continued to pace in silence, a good couple of feet separating our bodies. It was Reno who spoke first, when we both came to a natural stop just beyond a clearing in the trees. My gaze stayed trained ahead, body facing forward. Reno angled himself until he faced me. I gulped, releasing a long breath to control my heartbeat.

"How's college been?" He asked quietly.

Eyes flickering to the side, I tucked my chin. "Um, it's been... good."

"Good," he nodded, lips rubbing together. "You made a bunch of new friends?"

My teeth chewed nervously on my bottom lip. "Some."

His eyes seared into my head for a few quiet seconds. "I wasn't going to come tonight."

My gaze shot to him. The snap of discomfort in my chest unnerved me. Seeing him... might have been the best thing that had happened to me in a year. But thoughts like

that were reckless. I wrestled my mind into submission, averted my eyes, and said nothing.

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"I couldn't stay away, though," he continued, his voice rough. "Not when there was a chance you'd be here."

My heart thumped an erratic beat and my eyes shuttered briefly. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eyes.

He huffed a frustrated breath, an unsteady hand pushing through his hair before gripping the nape of his neck. "I hate this, Ri. Acting like strangers. I fucking hate it."

My arms lifted to cross over my chest and I rubbed my palms up and down over the goose bumps on my arms. A slight chill washed through me despite the warm night. Twisting until I could see him, the pain in my chest intensifying with every second that passed, I hiked my shoulders helplessly. "I'm sorry."

His hand dropped, thumb hooking into his jean pocket. "Fuck, don't... be sorry, Riley. It's not your fault, it's just..." He paused, anguished eyes scanning around us before coming back to rest on mine, "I wish it didn't have to be like this."

If I still made wishes that would be mine. I'd wish to find my way back. To him. To us. Liquid collected behind my lids, and I glanced down. The light breeze lifted strands of my hair and danced them around my face. Eyes glued to my feet, I watched as I dug the front of my flat into the soil, kicking softly. Shaking my head, I turned to him, craning my head back to really see him. I needed to see him.

"I missed you," I whispered, unsure where the words had come from or when I'd decided it was okay to utter them.

It wasn't smart. It wasn't helpful. And yet the line of tension across his shoulders eased instantly. The tight set of his face relaxed, and the hard line of his lips molded into an expression of relief. Like my words had cut through a thick web of unease.

The blazing fire in his eyes made it too hard to hold his gaze, but they wouldn't release me. He had me utterly snared.

"I missed you," he grated, those eyes piercing me, his voice rougher than the gravel beneath my feet. "More than I would have thought was possible."

It was the crack in his voice, the vulnerability that escaped, that gave me the strength to break his stare. Everything about him was too intense, and I felt my foundations crumbling to pieces.

One hand found my jaw, another gripped my shoulder, and he used them to turn me to him. His grip was urgent and his face fierce as it drew level with mine. "Ri?" He stole my gaze again. "I still love you."

I slammed my lids down against his impassioned declaration. My head twisted to escape but only made it as far as his cupped palm, where I burrowed my face and fought tears, trying to drown out his voice. I hadn't prepared for this.

Hadn't expected it. I didn't think I could hear it.

"I don't know what's going on in your life now, or if you even give a shit anymore, but I do, Riley. I. Fucking. Do. I never stopped." His breaths came fast and heavy, and I pushed my face deeper into his hand, wetting his skin with tears. "I've been a goddamn idiot, because you were right, Riley, I was scared. Scared of all the different ways loving you could hurt me. But you know what?"

The desperation in his tone had me stilling. His words reached the part of me that had never been able to deny him, and when I looked up into his blazing eyes through thick, wet lashes, my breaths hiccupped in my throat and my hands clasped his wrists.

Those dark eyes penetrated mine with a devastating intensity as he grated, "Trying not to love you... is fucking killing me."

His hands traveled to frame my face, thumbs stroking the wetness of my cheeks.

"I'm sorry I hurt you. Sorry I pushed you away, sorry you lost," he choked, his voice faltering. I saw the effort it took for him to pull himself together. "I'm so fucking sorry about the baby, Riley. I'm sorry about every fucking thing... but I swear to you, if you'll let me, I'll make it up to you. All of it. No more running scared, no more denying. I'll take anything I can get from you, anything you can give me, and I promise I will never hurt you again." He dipped until his nose almost touched mine. "I'm in love with you, Riley. I think I've loved you since I was nine years old, and I don't ever see that changing. I'm yours." His chest rose high with his deep inhale and his eyes brimmed with all the emotion he was begging me to see. "If you'll have me."

I wanted to say yes. So damn bad the words swept up my throat and burned on the tip of my tongue. But everything he was sorry for, everything I was sorry for... I couldn't disregard it so easily. We could take our messy past and try to erase it from the history books. We could burn those books to ash and bury them under six feet of mud. What

we couldn't do, though, was pretend it didn't happen, or pretend it couldn't happen again. I wouldn't survive that. It wasn't the sensible thing to do.

I rocked my head in the cocoon of his hands, eyes closed and tears coasting freely over my face.

"I can't," I whispered weakly.

"You can. We can!" he said, voice low and determined, while he gripped me tight, trying to pour his belief into me.

"No," I breathed, head still shaking. "No," I repeated, firmer now, as I tugged, extracting myself from his hold. With space between us, Reno's hands swung to his sides, heart break etched all over his beautiful face.

"No," I said.

His head fell and his hands landed atop it, fingers linking over his hair. Exhaling through his nose, he stared at me—into me—his eyes despondent, then he nodded once.

I turned. And I ran.

The ground crunched, giving way easily beneath me as I followed the trail clumsily through a veil of tears, and away from Reno. The farther I got, the louder my instincts screamed to go back. The more I sensed that I was losing that part of myself again, the part I'd just got back. Only now, I knew what it was. Now I knew I'd always left a piece of my heart with him... and I was doing it again. It hurt so much, it felt like it might tear me in two. I couldn't fathom how this could be the better option for me. How could the right thing feel so fucking wrong?

My steps faltered. Uncertainty gnawed at me, pulling me in two different directions. Heaving sobs built in my chest, the force of them painful, and I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth to hold them in. Forging forward on unsteady limbs, I emerged from the shelter of the trees and stopped. Various noises assaulted my ears and the flickering oranges and reds of the bonfire burned my eyes. I swiped the back of my hand under my eyes and over my face, trying to compose myself, to hide the evidence of my heart break. I couldn't force my legs to move. I couldn't make myself leave him. But how could I stay?

The sound of twigs snapping close by had me pulling up short and jerking my head round. My battered heart plunged to my feet when Raya Mitchell stepped into view. In no way was I battle ready. Completely ignoring her presence, I strode past her, hands still sweeping over my face.

"Riley," she called, voice soft, "you okay?"

I was so taken aback by the quiet concern that my feet staggered to a stop and my body whirled to face the person who'd been my nemesis for as long as my memory spanned back.

Dressed in similar jean shorts to mine, a nondescript tank that covered most of her generous cleavage and her long, dark hair pulled into a low pony that hung down her back, I tracked her movements as she advanced toward me. Too stunned to react, I stayed mute.

Her head dipped when she came to a stop, her dark brown gaze flickering over my face in something like understanding. Breathing out slowly, she brought her hands together in front of her body and interlaced her fingers.

"I owe you an apology," she said, and I almost hit the deck. My mouth definitely did.

"What?" I sputtered.

She snorted a little laugh through her nose, but eyes awash with regret met mine. "I've been in love with him since I was seven years old, did you know that?" My breath caught painfully. She looked away. "I had him fixed firmly in my sights ever since, and I'm pretty determined." One side of her lips ticked up in a smirk, but there was no humor in it. "For a while, I thought he and I were on the same page, and then you happened."

I opened my mouth to say something, but quickly realized I had absolutely nothing to say. Nothing. I was completely dumbfounded.

"And ever since then, he looked right through me. I put myself in his path, did anything I could just to get his attention, to keep him close to me, all the while knowing how he really felt. Knowing he didn't love me. I thought I could change his mind, but I never stood a chance. Guess you think I'm an idiot, right?" Her voice trembled, and I felt something for this girl that I never dreamed I would: sympathy.

I shook my head, hand still hovering over my mouth, knuckles grazing my lips. I cleared my throat. "No."

A sad smile tugged her lips down somehow. It was a strange look that crossed her face, like self-reflection and self-acceptance all rolled into one. She lifted a shoulder. "And that's why I hated you, Riley. You stopped him from seeing me. It took a long time for me to realize that wasn't your fault. Last year when he kissed me? The one and only time he kissed me... and all he was thinking about was you. I got it then, but it still took me a while to accept. So, I'm sorry. I treated you unfairly from the start."



I blinked slowly, my hand dropping from my face and my eyes scrutinizing the girl in front of me for some sign of dis-ingenuity, some evidence that this was all an elaborate prank and she'd revert to her evil ways any second. There was none.

She barked a quick laugh, a different smile twisting her lips, like she knew exactly what I was thinking. Her brows kicked up. "I deserve that. But I've done some growing up this past year, Riley. Enough to recognize that it isn't possible to force someone to feel a certain way, no matter how much you want them to." Her gaze diverted to the direction I'd come from. She knew he was there. "He's been miserable. Borderline depressed. I still care about him, enough that I want to see him happy, even if it's not with me. I tried," she said, drawing the word out on a sigh. "I did try. It isn't me who can help him." She tipped her forehead toward me, hitting me with a pointed stare. "It's you. It always was."

I inhaled sharply, her words sinking into me like the air that flowed into my lungs.

There were a magnitude of risks and reasons, so much potential for everything to go wrong. God so much already had. Yet, I still loved him, and you couldn't love someone halfway. There was no magic switch when things got tough; love didn't turn off and on with the press of a button.

It didn't keep track of the mistakes, the wrong turns, or the bad decisions. Love didn't care that it left us wide open, sitting ducks looking down the barrel of the farmer's gun. There were no guarantees, no reassurances. You jumped in with both feet and hoped like hell you could keep your head above water.

Love came with highs and lows. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't predictable. It wasn't even understandable. It just was.

It just fucking was.

And it meant everything. It consumed you whether you wanted it to or not. Denying it wouldn't change that. Love could break you down to little pieces, but sometimes, it was the only thing that could put you back together again. And my missing pieces... they were back there, with Reno.

I could keep walking, leave Reno and all the pieces of me that belonged to him right here, and never look back. This past year had proved I could go on, I could exist. But I wouldn't be happy, I wouldn't feel whole. I'd put time and distance between us. It had changed nothing. I loved him. My heart belonged to him. It always had.

I didn't want to leave it behind again.

I didn't want to leave him behind.

My head flew up. "I'm sorry, Raya. I'm sorry, too."

Then my feet were moving, taking me back down the route I'd just come from. Just before I broke into a run, my chest soaring, I looked over my shoulder and said, "Thank you."

She dipped her head, her brown eyes glistening.

Breaths panting, I raced to where my heart waited for me.

He stood in the same spot, his broad back to me, wide shoulders hunched, and his hands splayed out over the back of his head. At the sound of my approach, he spun, eyes popping wide with bemusement and hope when they landed on me.

I ran to him, throwing myself into his waiting arms. He caught me up, his head fitting against the side of mine as I let my legs wrap around his body and buried my face in the crook of his neck. Years could have passed before I eased back. With my hands clasped together at his nape, happiness raced through me so fast it made me dizzy.

His loving gaze trailed my face like a warm caress, and he smiled softly. "You changed your mind?"

I nodded, biting my lip, knowing without a doubt my eyes were shining. I'd take ha

"Staying with me won't break your heart, Ri," he promised, voice thick and cracking with emotion. "Loving you is the only thing in my life that's worth a damn. I'll never give you a reason to doubt that. And I'm never letting you go again." The corners of his lips curved up. "I fucking adore you, Riley Mason."

There were a thousand things I could say, and I'd get to them. Right now, I settled for the only thing that mattered. "I love you."

His eyes slid closed and his arms tightened around me.

It was simple. It was everything.

It was worth it.