



Aflame

PENELOPE DOUGLAS

Also by Penelope Douglas

Bully

Until You

Rival

Falling Away

Aflame

A Fall Away Novel

Penelope Douglas

PIATKUS

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For the girls . . .

For Juliet, who thinks everyone deserves a white picket fence,

For Fallon, who thinks that if we know what we really want, then there is no choice,

And for Tate, who knows that fighting with someone isn't half as satisfying as fighting *for* them.

Carry on, ladies.

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Aflame Playlist

Music inspires the development of my characters and inspires my scenes. Enjoy!

“Adrenaline” by Shinedown

“Alive” by P.O.D.

“Blow Me Away” by Breaking Benjamin

“The Boys of Summer” by The Ataris

“Breath” by Breaking Benjamin

“Click Click Boom” by Saliva

“Girls, Girls, Girls” by Mötley Crüe

“I Get Off” by Halestorm

“I Hate Everything About You” by Three Days Grace

“My Way” by Limp Bizkit

“Nothing Else Matters” by Apocalyptica

“She’s Crafty” by Beastie Boys

“Something Different” by Godsmack

“This Is the Time” by Nothing More

“Weak” by Seether

“Wish You Hell” by Like a Storm

“You Stupid Girl” by Framing Hanley

Note from the Author

Aflame is the conclusion of the Fall Away series, which includes *Bully*, *Until You*, *Rival*, and *Falling Away*. While every book in the series is written to be a stand-alone, *Aflame* will be most enjoyed by those who have read at least *Bully*, as *Aflame* is a continuation of that story.

Prologue

Tate

Four Years Ago

“Jared Trent,” I scolded, “if I get into trouble for the first time in my life, three weeks before I graduate high school, I’m telling my father it was your fault.”

I nearly jogged behind him as he pulled me along down the darkened school corridor, the music from the dance like a subterranean hum around us.

“Your father believes in taking personal responsibility, Tate,” he pointed out, and I could hear the humor in his tone. “Come on.” He squeezed my hand. “Pick up the pace.”

I stumbled as he led me faster up the steps onto the second floor, my royal blue floor-length prom dress sweeping the length of my legs. It was nearing midnight, and our senior prom, happening downstairs, wasn’t holding my boyfriend’s attention. Not that I thought it would.

Sometimes I imagined he simply endured social activities by plotting what he was going to do to me when we were finally alone. Jared Trent had a few favorite people in the world, and if you weren’t in that group, then you received a modicum of his attention. If he couldn’t be with me, then the only other people he could stand being around were his brother, Jax, and our best friend, Madoc Caruthers.

He hated dances, he hated dancing, and he loathed monotonous chatter. But while his demeanor was meant to push people away, it only enticed them to want to know him more. Much to his delight, of course.

But he put up with it. All for me. And did so with a smile on his face. He loved making me happy.

I jogged to keep pace and held his arm with both hands as I followed him. He swung open a classroom door and held it wide, waiting for me to enter. I pinched my eyebrows together, wondering what he was up to, but I hurried into the room anyway, afraid we’d be caught. We shouldn’t be roaming the school,

after all.

Once inside the deserted room, I twisted around as he followed me inside and closed the door.

“Penley’s classroom?” I prompted. We hadn’t stepped foot in this room since last semester.

His mischievous chocolate brown eyes flashed to me before he answered. “Yeah.”

I wandered down the aisle between two rows of empty desks, feeling him watching me.

“Where we hated each other,” I reminisced in a teasing voice.

“Yeah.”

I let my fingertips graze a wooden desktop. “Where we started to love each other,” I kept playing with him.

“Yeah.” His soft whisper felt like a warm blanket on my skin.

I grinned to myself, remembering. “Where I was your north.”

Elizabeth Penley was our literature teacher. We’d both had her for several classes but only for one class together. Themes in Film and Literature last fall.

When Jared and I were enemies.

She’d given us an assignment in which we had to find partners for each of the cardinal directions. Jared ended up being my “North.”

Reluctantly.

My strappy silver heels—which matched the silver jewels on my nearly backless dress—struck the floor as I turned around to eye him still standing by the door.

And his flat, stoic expression did nothing to hide the dangerous streak. I suddenly felt an urge to climb him like a tree.

I knew he hated suits, but he honestly looked like a devil of the best kind dressed up as he was. His tailored black pants draped down his legs and accentuated his narrow waist. The black dress shirt wasn’t tight, but it didn’t hide his body, either, and the black jacket and tie completed the look in a way that emanated power and sex, as always.

In the eight months since we’d gotten together, I’d become very adept at swallowing my drool before it seeped out of my mouth.

Luckily, he looked at me the same way.

He leaned against the door, his jacket pulled back from his waist as he slid his hands into his pockets and watched me with interest. His dark brown hair sat across his forehead in elegant chaos like a dark shadow hovering just above his

eyes.

“What are you thinking?” I asked when he continued to just stand there.

“How much I miss watching you come into this room,” he answered, looking me up and down.

My body warmed, knowing exactly what he was talking about. I’d enjoyed toying with him when I knew he was watching me in here.

“And,” he continued, “I’m going to miss how your hand shoots into the air like a big dork to answer questions.”

I gasped, my eyes rounding in mock anger. “Dork?” I repeated. I put my hands on my hips and pursed my lips to hide my smile.

He grinned and kept joking, “And also how you huddled so close to the desktop when you were concentrating on a test, and how you chewed your pencils when you were nervous.”

My gaze flashed to the side, where his old desk sat behind mine.

He went on, pushing off the door and inching closer to me. “I’m also going to miss how you blushed when I whispered things in your ear when Penley’s back was turned.” He cocked his head to the side, and I looked up at him as he approached me.

Shivers ran down my arms as I remembered Jared leaning forward over his desk and tickling my ear with his hot promises. I closed my eyes, feeling his chest brush against mine.

“I’m going to miss sitting two feet away,” he whispered over me, “and no one the wiser as to what I’d snuck into your room that morning to do to you.”

I sucked in a breath, feeling his forehead dip to mine.

He continued, “I’m going to miss the torture of wanting you in the middle of class and not being able to have you. I’m going to miss us in this room, Tate.”

Me, too.

The pull was always there between us. Even in a crowded classroom, full of noise and distraction, there was an invisible rope cutting through the space, connecting him and me. He touched me even when he couldn’t reach me. He whispered in my ear from twenty feet away. And I could always feel his lips even when we were apart.

I smiled and opened my eyes, his lips now an inch from mine. “Even though you sat behind me, I could always feel your eyes, Jared. Even when you acted like you hated me, I felt you watching me.”

“I never hated you.”

“I know.” I nodded gently, circling his waist with my arms.

The three years he'd made an enemy out of me seemed unbearable at the time. Now I was just glad it was all over. I was grateful that we were here. Together.

But I wouldn't look back on high school as a very enjoyable experience, and I knew he had a lot of guilt about that.

All of Jared's life, he'd suffered abandonment and loneliness. From his horrible father and alcoholic mother. From the neighbors who ignored what was happening and from the teachers who looked the other way.

The summer before freshman year, the parents who should've protected him hurt him nearly beyond repair. His father was abusive, leaving permanent scars, and his mother couldn't be there for him.

So Jared decided alone was best. He shut everyone out.

But with me, he went a step further. Several steps, actually. He sought revenge.

I was his best friend at the time, but he'd thought I'd abandoned him as well. It was a culmination of too many bad things happening in too little time, and Jared couldn't be forgotten about anymore. He wasn't going to allow it.

I was the one he could treat badly to feel in control again, and so I became his prey. All throughout high school I suffered at his hands.

Until last August, when I came back from my year abroad.

When Jared pushed, I started pushing back. The world turned upside down for both of us, and after more shit than I care to remember, we found our way back to each other.

"We have a lot of good memories in this room." I pulled my head back and looked up at him. "But there is one place where we don't have good memories . . ."

I slipped out of his arms and walked for the door, reaching down to slip off my heels. "Come on," I urged with a backward glance and a smile.

Swinging the door open, I darted out into the hallway and bolted, running.

"Tate!" I heard him yell, and I spun around, jogging backward as I watched him come out the classroom door. His eyebrows were pinched together in confusion as he watched me.

I bit my bottom lip to stifle a laugh before I whipped around and started running down the hallway again.

"Tate!" he called again. "You're a runner! This is an unfair advantage!"

I laughed, excitement energizing my arms and legs as I lifted my dress and hopped down two flights of stairs, racing down the hallway toward the Athletics

Department.

I could hear the thuds of his large body gaining on me. He was jumping stairs, and I squealed with giddy fright as I hurled open the locker room door and away from his gaining advance.

Hurrying to the third row of lockers, I collapsed against the little metal doors, my heavy breaths stretching the bust of my dress as I dropped my shoes.

I'd left my long blond hair down, but I'd had my best friend, K.C., blow it out and fix it in loose, wavy curls. Given the exertion, I was tempted to shove it away from my face, but Jared loved my hair down, and I wanted to drive him wild tonight.

The locker room door opened, and I fisted my hands, hearing him approach.

His soft steps rounded the corner as if he knew exactly where to find me.

"The girls' locker room?" he asked, discomfort written all over his face.

I knew he'd be timid, but I wasn't letting him off the hook.

I took a deep breath. "The last time we were here—"

"I don't want to think about the last time we were here," he cut me off, shaking his head.

But I forced it again. "The last time we were here," I emphasized, "you threatened me and tried to intimidate me," I told him as I walked over and grabbed his hand, leading him back to the spot against the lockers where we'd had our confrontation last fall. I leaned backward, taking his waist and leading him in close, so he hovered over me.

"You pushed into my space and hovered just like this," I whispered, "and I ended up being pretty damn embarrassed in front of the whole school. Remember?"

I laid it all out on the line for him. We couldn't be afraid to talk about it. We'd have to laugh, because I'd done enough crying. We'd face our fears and move on.

"You were mean to me," I pressed.

He'd come in after I'd showered, rushed my teammates out of the room, and issued a few threats as I tried to stand tall dressed in nothing but my towel. Then some students came in and snapped pictures of us, in which nothing was happening, but being nearly naked with a boy in the locker room didn't look so great to everyone in school who saw the pictures.

Jared's eyes, always soft with me now, always holding me close, turned heated. I clutched the lapels of his jacket and melted my body into his, wanting to make a good memory here.

His face inched closer to mine, and my breathing faltered as I felt his fingers glide up the inside of my thigh, clawing my dress higher and higher.

“So we’re back to where we started,” he whispered against my lips. “Are you going to hit me this time like I deserve?”

Amusement threatened, and I could feel the corners of my mouth turn up.

I slid out of his shadow, hopped up on the center bench behind him, and stood over him, loving his wide-eyed expression as he turned around to face me. Placing both of my hands against the lockers, now behind him, on either side of his head, I bore down, crowding his space as I leaned in close.

“If I ever lay my hands on you,” I whispered his same words to me from all those months ago, “you’ll want it.”

He let out a quiet laugh as his lips grazed mine.

I cocked my head, playing with him. “Do you?” I prompted. “Want it, I mean?”

He cupped my face with both hands and begged, “Yes.” And then he snatched up my lips. “Hell yes.”

And I melted.

I always melted.

Chapter 1

Jared

Present Day

Kids are crazy.

Batshit, certifiably, without-a-brain-in-their-head crazy. If you're not explaining something to them, then you're reexplaining it, because they didn't listen the first time, and as soon as you explain it, they ask the same damn question you just spent twenty minutes explaining the answer to!

And the questions. Holy fuck, the questions.

Some of these kids talked more in one day than I have in my entire life, and you can't get away from it, because they follow you.

Like, take a hint, you know?

"Jared! I want the blue helmet, and Connor had it last time, and it's my turn!" the half-pint blond kid whined from the track as all the other children climbed into their go-kart cars, two rows of six each.

I tipped my chin down and inhaled an aggravated breath as I gripped the fence surrounding the track. "It doesn't matter what color helmet you have on," I growled, tensing every muscle in my back.

Blondie—what the hell was his name again?—scrunched up his face, getting redder by the moment. "But . . . but it's not fair! He had it two times, and I—"

"Get the black helmet," I ordered, cutting him off. "It's your lucky one, remember?"

He pinched his eyebrows together, his freckled nose scrunching up. "It is?"

"Yes," I lied, the hot California sun beating down on my black-T-shirt-clad shoulders. "You wore it when we flipped in the buggy three weeks ago. It kept you safe."

"I thought I was wearing the blue one."

"Nope. The black," I lied again. I really had no idea what color he'd been

wearing.

I should feel bad about lying, but I didn't. When children got more reasonable, I could stop resorting to rocket science to get them to do what I wanted them to do. "Hurry up," I shouted, hearing little go-kart motors fill the air. "They're going to leave without you."

He ran for the other side of the gate to the shelves of helmets, snatching up the black one. I watched as all the kids, ranging in age from five to eight, strapped themselves in and shot each other excited little thumbs-ups. They gripped their steering wheels, their thin arms tense, and I felt a grin pull at the corners of my mouth.

This was the part that wasn't so bad.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watched with pride as they took off, each kid handling his or her car with increasing precision every week they came here. Their shiny helmets glistened in the early summer sunshine as the tiny engines zoomed around the bend and echoed in the distance as they sped off. Some kids were still pushing the pedal to the metal for the entire race, but others were learning to measure their time and assess the road ahead. Patience was hard to muster when you just wanted to be in front the entire race, but some quickly caught on that a good defense was the best offense. It wasn't just about getting ahead of that car; it was also about staying ahead of the cars already behind you.

And more than just learning, they were also having fun. If only a place like this had existed when I was that age.

But even at twenty-two, I was still grateful for it.

When these kids first walked through my door they knew next to nothing, and now they handled the track like it was a walk in the park. Thanks to me and the other volunteers. They were always happy to be here, full of smiles, and looking to me with anticipation.

They actually wanted to be around me.

What the hell for, I didn't know, but I was certain of one thing. As much as I complained or escaped to my office, struggling to scrape up just a little more patience, I absolutely, without a doubt, wanted to be around them, too. Some of them were pretty cool little shits.

When I wasn't traveling and working the circuit, racing with my own team, I was here, helping with the kids program.

Of course, it wasn't just a go-kart track. There was a garage and a shop, and lots of drivers and their girlfriends hung out, working on bikes and shooting the shit.

Godsmack's "Something Different" played over the speakers, and I looked up at the sky, seeing the sun beat down, blinding me.

It was probably raining back home today. June was big on summer thunderstorms in Shelburne Falls.

"Here," Pasha ordered, shoving a clipboard into my chest. "Sign these."

I grabbed it, scowling at my black-and-purple-haired assistant from under my sunglasses as the go-karts roared past.

"What is it?" I unclipped the pen and looked at what appeared to be a purchase order.

She watched the track, answering me. "One is an order for your bike parts. I'm just having them shipped to Texas. Your crew can sort through it when you get there in August—"

I dropped my arms to my sides. "That's two months away," I shot out. "How do you know that shit's still going to be there when I get there?"

Austin was going to be my first stop when I went back out on the road racing after my break. I understood her logic. I didn't need the equipment until then, but it was thousands of dollars' worth of parts that someone else could get their hands on. I'd rather have it here with me in California than three states away, unprotected.

But she just shot me a glare, looking like I'd put mustard on her pancakes. "The other two are forms faxed over from your accountant," she went on, ignoring my concern. "Paperwork to do with establishing JT Racing." And then she peered over at me, looking inquisitive. "Kind of vain, don't you think? Giving your business your initials?"

I dropped my eyes back down to the papers and began signing. "They're not my initials," I mumbled. "And I don't pay you to have an opinion about everything, and I certainly don't pay you to get on my nerves."

I handed over the clipboard, and she took it with a smile. "No, you pay me to remember your mom's birthday," she threw back. "You also pay me to keep your iPod fresh with new music, your bills paid, your motorcycles safe, your schedule on your phone, your flights booked, your favorite foods in your refrigerator, and my personal favorite: I'm to call you thirty minutes after you've been forced to go to some function or party and give you a dire excuse as to why you need to leave said social gathering, because you hate people, right?" Her tone dripped with cockiness, and I was suddenly glad I didn't grow up with a sister.

I didn't hate people.

Okay, yes. I hated most people.

She continued, “I schedule your haircuts, I run this place and your Facebook page—I do love all the topless photos chicks send you, by the way—and I’m the first person you seek out when you want someone to yell at.” She planted her hands on her hips, squinting at me. “Now, I forget. What *don’t* you pay me to do again?”

My chest inflated with a heavy breath, and I chewed the corner of my mouth until she took the hint and left. I could practically smell her smug smile as she made her way back to the shop.

She knew she was priceless, and I’d walked into that one. I might take a lot of sass from her, but she was right. She took a lot of it from me, too.

Pasha was my age and the daughter of the man I co-owned this bike shop with. Although the old man, Drake Weingarten, was a racing legend on the motorcycle circuits, he chose to be a silent partner and enjoy his retirement in the pool hall down the street when he was in town or in his cabin near Tahoe when he wasn’t.

I liked having this as a home base near the action in Pomona, and I’d found I actually took an interest in the kids program he sponsored here when I started hanging around the motorcycle shop almost two years ago. When he’d asked if I wanted to plant some roots and buy into this place, it was the perfect timing.

There was nothing left for me back home. My life was here now.

A cool, little hand slipped into mine, and I looked down to see Gianna, a bright-faced brunette I’d grown pretty fond of. I smiled, looking for her usual cheery expression, but she squeezed my hand and brushed her lips into my arm, looking like she was ten kinds of sad instead.

“What’s the matter, kiddo?” I joked. “Whose butt do I need to kick?”

She wrapped both of her little arms around mine, and I could feel her shaking.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, “I guess crying is such a girlie thing to do, isn’t it?” The sarcasm in her voice was unmistakable.

Oh, boy.

Chicks—even eight-year-old chicks—were complicated. Women didn’t want to tell you what was wrong flat out. Oh, no. It couldn’t be that easy. You had to get a shovel and dig it out of them.

Gianna had been coming around for more than two months, but just recently she’d started in the racing club. Out of all the kids in the class, she had the most promise. She worried about being perfect, she always looked over her

shoulder, and it seemed as if she always figured out how to argue with me even before she knew what I was going to say—but she had it.

The gift.

“Why aren’t you on the track?” I pulled my arm out of her grasp and sat down on the picnic table to meet her eye to eye.

She stared at the ground, her bottom lip quivering. “My dad says I can’t take part in the program anymore.”

“Why not?”

She shifted from side to side on her feet, and my heart skipped when I looked down and saw her red Chucks. Just like the ones Tate wore the first time I met her when we were ten.

Looking back up, I watched her hesitate before answering. “My dad says it makes my brother feel bad.”

Leaning my elbows down to my knees, I twisted my head to study her. “Because you beat your brother in the race last week,” I verified.

She nodded.

Of course. She’d beat everyone last week, and her brother—her twin—left the track crying.

“He says my brother won’t feel like a man if I race with him.”

I snorted, but then I straightened my face when I saw her scowl. “It’s not funny,” she whimpered. “And it’s not fair.”

I shook my head and grabbed the shop cloth out of my back pocket. “Here,” I offered, letting her dry her tears.

Clearing my throat, I got closer and spoke in a low voice. “Listen, you’re not going to understand this now, but remember it for later,” I told her. “Your brother is going to do a lot over the years to feel like a man, but that’s not your problem. You got that?”

Her expression remained frozen as she listened.

“Do you like racing?” I asked.

She nodded quickly.

“Are you doing anything wrong?”

She shook her head, her two low pigtails swinging across her shoulders.

“Should you be afraid to do something you like just because you’re a winner and other people can’t handle that?” I pushed.

Her innocent storm blue eyes finally looked up at me, and she tipped her chin up, shaking her head. “No.”

“Then get your butt on the track,” I commanded, turning to the go-karts

flying by. “You’re late.”

She flashed a smile that took up half her face and shot off toward the track entrance, full of excitement. But then she stopped and swung back around. “But what about my dad?”

“I’ll handle your dad.”

Her smile flashed again, and I had to fight to hold back my own.

“Oh, and I’m not supposed to tell you this,” she taunted, “but my mom thinks you’re hot.”

And then she twisted around and darted off toward the cars.

Great.

I let out an awkward breath before glancing over to the bleachers where the moms sat. Jax would call them cougars, and Madoc would just call them.

Well, before he was married, anyway.

It was always the same with these women, and I knew some of them enrolled their kids simply to get closer to the drivers and riders who hung out here. They showed up in full hair and makeup, usually in heels and tight jeans or short skirts, as if I was going to pick one and take her into the office as her kid played outside.

Half of them had their phones in front of their faces to look like they weren’t doing what I knew they were. Thanks to Pasha’s big mouth, I knew that while some people used their sunglasses to disguise that they were staring at you, these women were zooming in with their cameras to stare at me close-up.

Super. I then and there made it another part of Pasha’s job description not to tell me shit I didn’t need to know.

“Jared!” Pasha’s bark boomed over every other sound here. “You have a phone call on Skype!”

I cocked my head to the side, peering over at her. Skype?

Wondering who the hell wanted to video chat, I got up and walked through the café and into the shop/garage, ignoring the faint whispers and sideways glances from people who recognized me. No one knew me outside of the motorcycle world, but inside it, I was starting to get a name for myself, and the attention was always going to be hard to deal with. If I could have the career without it, I would, but the crowds came with the racing.

Stepping into the office, I closed the door and rounded my desk, staring at my laptop screen. “Mom?” I said to the woman who was a female version of me in looks.

Thank God I didn’t look like my dad.

“Aw,” she cooed, “so you do remember who I am. I was worried.” She nodded condescendingly, and I leaned down on the desk, arching a brow.

“Don’t be dramatic,” I grumbled.

I couldn’t tell where she was from the furniture behind her. All I saw was a lot of white in the background, so I assumed it was a bedroom. Her husband—and my best friend’s father, Jason Caruthers—was a successful lawyer, and their new Chicago apartment was probably the best money could buy.

My mother, on the other hand, was perfectly recognizable. Absolutely beautiful, and a testament to the fact that people do take advantage of the second chances they’re given. She looked healthy, alert, and happy.

“We talk every few weeks,” I reminded her. “But we’ve never video chatted before, so what’s up?”

Since I had quit college and left home two years ago, I’d been back only once. Just long enough to realize it was a mistake. I hadn’t seen my friends or my brother, and even though I’d kept in touch with my mother, it had been only via phone and text. And even that was kept short and sweet.

It was better that way. Out of sight, out of mind, and it worked, too, because every time I heard my mother’s voice or got an e-mail from my brother or a text from someone back home, I thought about her.

Tate.

My mother leaned in close, her chocolate hair, same as mine, falling over her shoulders. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s start over,” she chirped and straightened her back. “Hey, son.” She smiled. “How are you doing? I’ve missed you. Have you missed me?”

I let out a nervous laugh and shook my head. “Jesus,” I breathed out.

Aside from Tate, my mother knew me better than anyone. Not because we’d shared so much mother-son time over the years, but because she’d lived with me long enough to know I didn’t like unnecessary bullshit.

Small talk? Yeah, not my thing.

Plopping my ass down in the high-back leather chair, I placated her. “I’m doing fine,” I said. “And you?”

She nodded, and I noticed the happiness that made her skin glow. “Keeping busy. There’s lots going on back home this summer.”

“You’re in Shelburne Falls?” I asked. She spent most of her time about an hour away in Chicago with her husband. Why was she back in our hometown?

“Just got back yesterday. I’ll be staying for the rest of the summer.”

I dropped my eyes, faltering for a split second, but I knew my mother saw

it. When I looked back up, she was watching me. And I waited for what I knew was coming.

When I didn't say anything, she egged me on. "This is the part where you ask me why I'm staying with Madoc and Fallon instead of in the city with my husband, Jared."

I averted my eyes, trying to look disinterested. Her husband used to own the house in Shelburne Falls, but he gave it to Madoc when he married. Jason and my mother still stayed there when they were in town, and for some reason my mother thought I was interested.

She was playing me. Trying to get me intrigued. Trying to get me to ask about home.

Maybe I didn't want to know. Or maybe I did . . .

Talking to my brother had been easy these past two years away. He knew not to pry, and he knew I'd bring up anything I felt like talking about. My mother, on the other hand, was always a time bomb. I always wondered when she'd bring it up.

She was in Shelburne Falls, and it was summer break. Everyone would be there.

Everyone.

Instead, I rolled my eyes and leaned back in the chair, determined not to indulge her need for playing games.

She laughed, and I looked up.

"I love you." She chuckled, changing the subject. "And I'm glad your disdain for small talk hasn't wavered."

"Are you?"

She tipped her chin up, her rich eyes sparkling. "It's comforting to know some things never change."

I gritted my teeth, waiting for the bomb to detonate. "Yeah, I love you, too," I said absently and cleared my throat. "So get to the point. What's up?"

She tapped her fingers on the desk in front of her. "You haven't been home in two years, and I'd like to see you. That's all."

I had been home. Once. She just hadn't known it.

"That's it?" I asked, not believing her. "If you miss me so much, then get your ass on a plane and come see me," I teased.

"I can't."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why?"

"Because of this." And she stood up, revealing her very pregnant belly.

My eyes grew wide, and my face fell as I wondered what the fuck was going on.

Holy shit.

I felt the vein in my neck throb, and I just stared at the ski slope running from her neck to her waist, and . . . and it couldn't be real.

Pregnant? She was not pregnant! I was twenty-two. My mother was, like, forty.

I watched her flatten her palms on her back and slowly lower herself back down into a sitting position. I licked my dry lips and breathed hard.

"Mom?" I hadn't blinked. "Is this some kind of joke?"

She offered a sympathetic look. "I'm afraid not," she explained. "Your sister is due to arrive within three weeks . . ."

Sister?

"And I want all of her brothers here to greet her when she does," she finished.

I looked away, my heart pumping heat throughout my body.

Holy shit, she's fucking pregnant.

Sister, she'd said.

And all of her brothers.

"So it's a girl," I said, more to myself than to her.

"Yes."

I rubbed the back of my neck, thankful that my mother was light on the chatter, so I could process this. I had no idea what to think.

She was going to have a baby, and part of me wanted to know what the hell she was thinking. She'd been an alcoholic for about fifteen years while I was growing up, and while I knew she always loved me and she was ultimately a good person, I'd also be the first person to burst her little bubble and tell her she had sucked as a parent.

But the other part of me knew that she'd recovered. She'd earned a second chance, and after five years sober, I guessed she was ready for it. She'd also been a perfect surrogate mother to my half-brother, Jax, when he came to live with us, and she had an amazing support system now.

Just one that hadn't included me since I'd been absent.

Her stepson, Madoc, and his wife, Fallon; Jax and his girlfriend, Juliet; my mother's husband, Jason; the housekeeper, Addie . . . everyone was there for her except me.

I shook my head clear and turned back to the screen. "Jesus . . . Mom, I . . ."

I'm . . ." I was stammering badly. I had no clue what to say or do. I wasn't touchy-feely or good with this kind of stuff.

"Mom." I swallowed and looked her in the eye. "I'm happy for you. I never would've thought—"

"That I wanted more kids?" she cut in. "I want all of my kids, Jared. I miss you very much," she admitted. "Madoc and Fallon are watching over me, since Jason is finishing up a case in the city, and Jax and Juliet are being wonderful, but I want you here. Come home. Please."

I cleared my throat. *Home.*

"Mom, my schedule is . . ." I searched for an excuse. "I'll try, but it's just —"

"Tate's not here," she cut me off, dropping her gaze. My pulse echoed in my ears.

"If that's what you're worried about," she explained. "Her father is in Italy for a few months, so she's spending the summer there."

I tipped my chin down, inhaling a hard breath.

Tate's not home.

Good. My jaw hardened. *That's good.* I wouldn't have to deal with it. I could go home and spend time with my family, and it could be done with. I wouldn't have to see her.

I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I'd been afraid of running into her. So much so that I hadn't gone home.

I ran my palm down my thigh, ridding myself of the sweat that always came when I thought about her. Even though I'd left to make myself whole, there was still a piece of me that seemed forever hollow.

A piece only she ever filled.

I couldn't see her and not want her. Or not want to hate her.

"Jared?" My mother was talking, and I evened out my expression.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I'm here."

"Listen to me," she ordered. "This isn't about why you've been away. This is about your sister. That's all I want you to think about right now. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I . . ." Her eyes fell, and she looked to be searching for words. "I never know what you're thinking, Jared. You're so guarded, and I wanted to have you to myself to tell you this in person. You never find time to come home, however, and I've waited as long as I can."

I didn't know why it bugged me that my mom had a hard time talking to me. I guess I'd never really thought about it, but since she'd put it out there, I

realized I didn't like that I made her nervous.

She took a deep breath and looked at me, her eyes kind but serious. "We need you," she said softly. "Madoc will be the one playing with all of her toys with her. Jax will be climbing mountains with her on his shoulders. But you're her shield, Jared. The one who will make sure she is never hurt. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. Quinn Caruthers needs all of her brothers."

I couldn't help it—I smiled.

Quinn Caruthers. *My sister*. She had a name already.

And hell yes I was going to be there for that.

I nodded, giving her my answer.

"Good." A relieved look crossed her face. "Jax emailed you a plane ticket."

And then she clicked off.

Chapter 2

Jared

Two Years Ago

I love mornings like this. Mornings when I wake up first, and I can just watch her sleep for a few minutes. The smooth, glowing skin of her chest rises and falls with her shallow breaths, and I know that if I slide my fingers up her back, underneath her tank top, I'll feel her sweat. She overheats when she sleeps.

I relax into the chair by her window, watching her soft pink lips purse as she starts to stir. Her long, slender neck calls to me, and I'm desperate.

Fucking desperate never to leave her. Wanting never to do what I know I have to do right now.

Tate holds my heart, and I could choke trying to swallow and bury my need for her.

I try to remember the good things. The things that will keep me alive in her heart while I'm away. The rainy nights in my car. How the skin of her neck tastes different from the skin of her lips. How hot she gets under the sheets.

How I hate sleeping alone now.

Her phone starts vibrating on her nightstand, and I tighten my fists, knowing that everything is about to fall apart.

When she wakes, I have to hurt her.

Her head turns to the other side, and I see her eyes flutter open, her body coming to life. She inhales a deep breath and slowly pulls herself to a sitting position. She notices me right away and holds my gaze across the room. A small smile dances across her face until she sees me not smiling back.

I nod to her phone, hoping she'll answer it and give me a minute. Heat floods my chest, and my heart pounds. I need to be able to do this. For her, and for me.

For our future together.

She looks at her phone, swiping her thumb up and down the screen, and

then back up at me. “They made it,” she whispers. “They’re in New Zealand.”

She’s talking about Jax and Juliet. I’d driven them to the airport yesterday, and they must’ve been texting to let her know that they arrived safely. I probably had the same text, but my phone was in my duffel bag at my feet.

“Where are you going?” she asks, noticing the bag.

I drop my eyes but look up again, determined not to be a fucking coward. “I’m leaving for a while, Tate.” I try to keep my voice soft.

Her eyes turn worried. “ROTC?” she asks.

“No.” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “I . . .” I let out a breath, speaking slowly. “Tate, I love you—”

But she throws off her sheets and starts breathing hard, already knowing where this is going. With her long blond hair pulled back into a low ponytail, I can see the realization written all over her face.

“Jax was right,” she rasps.

“Jax is always right,” I admit, wishing I could keep doing what I’d been doing for the past two years. Just take her lips, turn off the lights, and shut out the world.

My brother can voice what everyone else is afraid to face, and he knows me like he knows himself. I’m unhappy, and I can’t use Tate to hold me up anymore.

“Continuing like this . . .” I shake my head. “I’d make you miserable.”

My brother knows that I hate ROTC. He knew without my telling him that I hate my life in Chicago. I hate school. I hate the apartment. I hate feeling like I’m a lost puzzle piece.

Where the hell did I fit?

And since Tate had overheard Jax and me the other day, now she’s on to me, too. It’s time to own up.

Fuck up, own up, and then get up.

Her eyes shoot to mine, and I can see the tears pooling there. “Jared, if you want to quit ROTC, then quit,” she cries. “I don’t care. You can study anything. Or nothing. Just—”

“I don’t know what I want!” I burst out, yelling so I won’t cry. “That’s the problem, Tate. I need to figure things out.”

“Away from me,” she snaps.

I stand up, running a hand through my hair. “You’re not the problem, babe.” I try to soothe her. “You’re the only thing that I’m sure of. But I need to grow up, and it’s not happening here.”

I’m twenty, and all I know about myself is that I love Tatum Brandt.

Two years ago I thought that was enough.

“Here, where?” she prods. “Chicago? Shelburne Falls? Or around me?”

I clench my jaw and stare out her French doors. I just want to grab her and keep her. I don’t want to leave.

But I can’t do what she wants me to do. I can’t quit school to find myself and be around her at the same time. What do I do? Stay home all day, wander the city, take on odd jobs as I explore my options for who knows how many years while she comes home every day from her classes, which keep her life moving forward?

I hate to put it like this, but the raw truth? My pride can’t take it.

I can’t be the deadbeat boyfriend doing shit with his life as he figures himself out while she’s there to see it.

But I will come back. I’ll always want her.

She sits on the bed where we’ve slept next to each other for nearly ten years. The bed where I’ve made love to her countless times, and I feel like a candy-ass right now. I’m a fucking coward because I need to leave, and a coward because I don’t want to. I feel myself giving in.

But I clear my throat and meet her eyes, pushing forward. “The apartment is paid up for the school year, so you don’t have to worry—”

“A year!” she cuts me off, shooting out of bed. “A fucking year! Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing, okay?” I admit. “I don’t feel like I fit in at college! I feel like you’re moving a hundred miles an hour, and I’m constantly trying to catch up!”

She shakes her head at me, unable to believe what’s happening.

I steady my voice, speaking firmly. I have to do this. “You know what you’re doing and what you want, Tate, and I’m . . .” I steel my jaw. “I’m fucking blind. I can’t breathe.”

She turns away to hide tears I know are falling. “You can’t breathe,” she repeats, and my stomach knots. Did she think that this didn’t hurt me, too?

“Baby.” I pull her around to face me. “I love you.” I look into her storm blue eyes. “I love you so goddamn much. I just . . . I just need time,” I plead. “Some space, to figure out who I am and what I want.”

Her eyes search mine as she lowers her voice. “So what happens?” she asks. “What happens when you find the life you’re looking for?”

I straighten my back, taken by surprise. There was no future without her in it. She had to know that.

“I don’t know yet,” I admit. I didn’t know where I’d end up, what I’d be doing, but she was mine. Always.

I would be coming home again.

She nods. “I do,” she says, her voice turning clipped. “You didn’t come in here to tell me you’ll be back. That you’ll call or we’ll text. You came in here to break up with me.”

She pulls away and tries to turn around, but I catch her. “Baby, come here.”

But she brings her arms down, severing my hold. “Oh, just get out!” she shouts, looking up at me with fire in her eyes. “You cut off everyone who loves you. You’re pathetic. I should be used to this by now.”

“Tate—”

“Just leave!” she shouts and walks for her bedroom door, yanking it open. “I’m sick of the sight of you, Jared. Just go.”

I shake my head, narrowing my eyes on her. “No,” I argue. “I need you to understand.”

She lifts a defiant chin. “All I’ll ever understand is that you needed to live a life without me in it, so just go and do that.”

“I don’t want this.” I search for the words to get her back. “Not like this. I don’t want to hurt you. Just sit down, so we can talk. I can’t leave you like this,” I press. Why can’t she understand? I’m not leaving her. I’m coming back.

But she shakes her head. “And I won’t let you stay. You need to be free? Then, go. Get out.”

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and watch her. What the hell’s happening? Regret races through my brain as I think that maybe I should’ve done this differently. Sat her down and eased into it. But I don’t know how to do that shit. I don’t know how to be gentle.

Fuck, I’d blindsided her. Even though we’d been distant the past week, I knew she wasn’t expecting this.

After everything I’d done to her over the years, she still doesn’t trust me. She doesn’t see that I’m trying to be strong. That I’m trying to be a man. All she sees right now is me causing her more pain, and she’s had enough.

“Now,” she orders, her tears drying on her face.

I let my eyes fall, and every muscle in my arms tenses with the urge to charge her. Take her, hold her to me, and will her to melt into me like she always does. I have to have Tate in my life.

She’ll wait for me.

And as I grab my bag and leave, I know that I'll be back. I have to do this, but I will be back for her.

I didn't even need a year, either. Only six months.

Turns out six months was too long.

"Awesome," Pasha bit out, peering out the window of her first-class seat. "I totally get what they mean by 'flyover state' now."

I ignored her distaste for whatever she was seeing out there and stuffed my iPad into my carry-on, nudging it back under my seat with my foot.

"Cheer up," I sighed. "We have cars and liquor and cigarettes in Shelburne Falls, too. It will feel just like home to you."

She settled back into her seat, and I could feel her little scowl directed at the seat in front of her. "Looking forward to it." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "I do get to get drunk tonight, right?" she confirmed.

I grinned and closed my eyes against the popping in my ears as we descended. "As long as you are glued to my side, I don't give a shit what you do."

I could hear her short, aggravated breaths, and I wondered—probably as much as she did—why I felt the need to drag her with me. "This is weird," she grumbled. "You're weird. Why do I have to be here?"

"Because I pay—"

"You to," she finished. "Well, someday when you want a kidney, it's really going to cost you, man."

I licked my lips, envisioning an invisible hand pressing on my heart to slow that fucker down. In a minute, I'd be back at home base, and even though Tate wasn't there, I was nervous. Seeing my house, her house next door, our old high school . . . and my best friend, who wasn't talking to me . . .

Jesus, I was a little bitch.

I twisted my head, still lying on the headrest. "Pasha?" I mumbled softly. "What do you want me to say? That I can't chew my food without you these days?" I shrugged. "I'd rather have you around and not need you than need you and not have you."

Her dark eyebrows—the right one adorned with two barbells—pinched together, and she looked over at me like I'd grown a horn. I'm sure she knew it, but I'd certainly never admitted it before. I relied on her a lot, and it was a

perfect arrangement, because she liked to be needed. Neglect did that to people.

As much as I liked her dad, he was about as good a parent as my mom was when I was growing up.

Pasha turned out well, though. She reeled me back in when I was drowning and made a lot of decisions for me when I couldn't. She got me out of the pit crew and turned me on to motorcycles, hooked me up with sponsors and investors, and convinced me to buy into the shop. None of this happened over calm and reasonable business dinners—more like her screaming at me to get my head out of my ass—but before I knew it, I had so much shit going on, there was no time to think. She filled my life with noise when the quiet was too dangerous.

I not only needed her, but I wanted her around.

And now she knew it.

She was probably going to ask for another fucking raise.

Jax was waiting outside the terminal even though I'd told him I would text when we were at passenger pickup.

But I grinned anyway the minute I saw him, barely noticing Pasha zoom past us to go outside for a cigarette.

“Hey.” I hooked an arm around Jax's neck and pulled him in, dropping my duffel on the floor.

“Hey,” he said for only me to hear. “I missed you.”

I let my eyes close for a second, all of a sudden weighted down by how long I'd been away from him. We'd kept in regular contact, and even though I'd stayed away only to avoid one particular person, Jax had suffered the price, too.

I was his blood. The only blood he had.

Pulling away, I took stock of everything that hadn't changed. His black hair, styled to look like he'd just run his fingers through it, and his blue eyes were the same vibrant azure as the last time I'd seen him. No scars or bruises that I could see, so I knew he was keeping out of trouble.

Not that Jax got in regular fights anyway, but instinct told me to make sure. He still dressed in jeans and black T-shirts, matching me almost to a tee. I shook my head when I realized he was also taking stock of me, and then he finally relaxed, putting an arm around his girlfriend's shoulders.

“Juliet.” I finally looked over, seeing her slip a hand around his waist.

She smiled and then greeted me. “It's good to see you.”

I wasn't sure if that was true, but I didn't really care. She and I got along fine, but we weren't—and probably never would be—besties. I had a limited tolerance for mindless chatter, and she seemed to regard me with less and less cordiality as well. Probably because of Tate.

Back in high school, Juliet went by her sister's initials, K.C. When she started dating my brother two years ago, she reclaimed her birth name, and it still took some getting used to for me.

I picked up my bag and looked at both of them. "I hear congratulations are in order," I told Juliet. "Teaching in Costa Rica? You two ready for that?"

Juliet had just graduated with her teaching degree, and since Jax had also beaten the clock and finished college early, the two of them were headed to Central America in the fall. Jax had told me a few weeks back that she had signed a one-year contract, but I hadn't talked to Juliet about it at all.

She turned to look at him, a knowing smile playing on her lips as if they shared a private joke. "There's no adventure too big," she teased, speaking more to him than to me.

I cleared my throat. "So where's our mother?"

Jax stuck his hands in his pockets. "Doctor's appointment."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." He nodded and turned around, starting to lead us out of the airport. "She's perfect. When you get close to term you have to go in every week, apparently. You should see her, man." He laughed under his breath. "She's shopping like crazy and eating ice cream after every meal, but she's on top of the world."

I followed, seeing Pasha coming toward us, having just come back in.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me that she was pregnant?" I prodded Jax.

I knew why my mom had kept it from me, but Jax could've warned me.

He shook his head, smirking at me. "Dude, it's not my business to tell you your mom is pregnant. Sorry." By his amused tone, I could tell he wasn't sorry. "Besides, she really didn't want you to find out over the phone. That's why she's been trying to get you home."

A pang of guilt started jabbing at me from several directions when I thought of all the shit I was going to have to smooth over. Answering my mother's questions, Madoc's silent treatment, and getting reacquainted with my brother . . .

"Um . . . hi." Juliet turned around as we kept walking, looking at Pasha. "Are you with Jared?"

I swung my bag over my shoulder, looking to Juliet.

“Sorry,” I shot out. “You guys, this is Pasha.” I jerked my chin at the girl next to me. “Pasha, this is my brother, Jax, and his girlfriend, Juliet.”

“Hey,” Pasha said casually.

Juliet shook Pasha’s hand quickly and then turned around, looking confused. I caught her sideways glance at Jax.

“Hi, Pasha.” Jax gave her a quick shake and then glanced to me quickly before crossing the walkway to the parking garage. “Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing someone, man?”

I let out a bitter laugh but was cut off.

“Aw,” Pasha cooed as we headed into the parking garage. “You didn’t tell him about us, honey?” And she kneaded my biceps with her hot pink fingernails.

I rolled my eyes. “My assistant, guys.” I tossed my bag in the trunk of my old Mustang, now Jax’s car. “She’s just my assistant. That’s all.”

Jax swung his pointer finger between us as he walked to the driver’s side. “So you two aren’t . . . ?”

“Ewww,” Pasha grumbled, disgust written all over her face.

“So you’re gay, then?” he shot back.

I snorted, shaking with laughter as I opened the passenger side door for the girls.

Pasha planted her hands on her hips. “How did . . . what . . . ?” she stammered, looking to me accusingly.

I held up my hands, feigning innocence.

Jax narrowed his eyes on her over the hood. “When you think about the women who aren’t interested in my brother, it pretty much just leaves the lesbians.”

Pasha grumbled and climbed into the backseat behind Juliet. I slammed the door and headed to the driver’s side.

Jax straightened, seeing me coming. “This is my car now.” He knew what I was doing.

I pinned him with a pointed look. “And I don’t ride. I’ll wait for you to come to terms with that.”

After about three seconds, he realized he wasn’t going to win. He finally let out a hard sigh and walked his ass around to the passenger side.

Climbing in, I started the engine and stilled, slowly easing back into the seat. The old, familiar rumble of the engine reminded me of a time so long ago. Back when I was the king of a small pond. When I thought I knew everything.

The long, late-night drives, my music filling the small space, as I planned my life around Tate and how I was going to torment her in the only universe that mattered.

An image of her flashed in my mind, walking to school. Her back would straighten when she'd hear my engine coming, and I'd blow past her, seeing her hair whip in the wind in my rearview mirror. I almost wished she was in town this summer.

I'd give almost anything to make her feel me again.

Not to mention, she'd turned my best friend against me. He wasn't talking to me, and I knew it was because of her.

I buckled up. "So let's have it," I told Jax. "Where's Madoc?"

He hesitated, speaking softly. "Around," he caged. "He commutes to his summer internship here in the city, but he's still staying at his house in Shelburne Falls."

"Good." I nodded, remembering that it was early Friday afternoon. "I'm going to hit his house before we go home."

"Dude," Jax urged as I drove out of the garage. "I don't think Madoc's going to be up for—"

"Screw it," I gritted out. "It's been two years. I'm sick of his bullshit."

Chapter 3

Tate

Summer breaks no longer exist once you reach college. Maybe you start taking a summer class, or you pick up a summer job, or you have a reading list or an extra credit to pick up, but free time slowly starts to ebb away, and before you know it, you're doing one thing a day that you like and fifteen that you hate.

Welcome to adulthood, my father would say.

I should be grateful. All in all it wasn't so bad. Opportunity abounded in my life, and anyone else would be gracious and appreciative. My education would secure my future.

I had it made. I'd be a doctor someday. Maybe close to home. Maybe far away. I'd undoubtedly marry and have children. The house and car payments would come. The stock portfolios to ensure a comfortable retirement. Maybe I'd have a time-share in the Bahamas. I'd laugh at my children's school plays and hug them when they were scared.

My patients would hopefully bring a feeling of worth into my life. I would help some and lose others. I was prepared for that. I would comfort many and cry with a few. I would take everything in stride and with the knowledge that I did my very best.

My professional life would be devoted to curing illnesses. My private life would be the dutiful spouse and mother.

Patients and patience.

And up until two years ago, I was excited for all of it.

I had wanted all of it.

"There you are." Ben took my hand, brushing a kiss on my cheek. "They've been paging you for five minutes."

I smiled, placing a hand on his chest and leaning in. "Sorry," I whispered, kissing him again, gently on the lips this time. "I couldn't exactly drop the bedpan, could I?" I joked, pulling back and setting my charts down at the nurse's station.

The corners of his bottom lip turned down at the disgusting thought. “Good point,” he acquiesced. “Besides,” I continued, “I’m a woman worth waiting for. You know that.”

He lifted his chin and hooded his blue eyes. “I’m still deciding,” he taunted. “Ouch.” I laughed. “Maybe Jax was right after all then.”

His face fell, the humor gone. “What did that guy say about me now?” he grumbled.

I grinned, pulling my blue scrub shirt over my head, leaving me in my white tank top. “He said that you’re awesome,” I teased.

Ben cocked an eyebrow, knowing better.

Jax, my ex-boyfriend’s brother, didn’t like anyone that tried to take his brother’s place in my life. Good thing I didn’t need his approval.

I shrugged and kept going. “But he does think that I am far too much for you to handle.”

His eyes bugged out, and he smiled, challenge accepted. Sliding his hand around the back of my neck, he stepped up and crashed his lips down on mine.

The warmth of his body surrounded me, and I relaxed into the kiss, savoring the hunger I felt rolling off of him.

He wanted me.

I might not be reeling from need of him, but he made me feel in control, and I definitely liked that.

Pulling away, he smiled like he’d just proved a point.

I licked my lips, tasting his Spearmint gum. Ben always had a flavor and taste I could pin down. Mint or cinnamon on the lips, cologne on the clothes, Paul Mitchell in the hair . . . and it occurred to me that I didn’t really know what he smelled like without all of that. Cologne preferences change over time. So do shampoos and breath mints. What would he smell like on my pillow? Would it change or always be constant?

He gestured to the black container and package of wooden chopsticks on top of the counter. “I brought you dinner. It’s sushi,” he pointed out. “Salmon is supposed to be, like, some super brain food.” He waved a hand in front of us. “And you’ve been burning the midnight oil, so I thought you could use it.”

“Thank you.” I tried to act excited, knowing it was the thought that counted. I hated sushi, but he didn’t know that. “But I’m actually about to get off work. I thought I told you that.”

He narrowed his eyes, thinking, and then they went wide. “Yes, you did.” He let out a breath and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Your schedule changes so

much, I forgot.”

“It’s okay.” I unwrapped my messy bun, feeling instant relief as the cursed bobby pins were removed. When I wasn’t working at the hospital—giving sponge baths and administering Band-Aids—I was at the library getting ahead on my reading list for my fall classes, or at the Loop, blowing off steam. I was a hard girl to pin down lately, but Ben rolled with it.

“I can still eat it,” I offered, not wanting to be ungracious. “And now I don’t need to worry about dinner, so you see? You really are a lifesaver.”

He grabbed hold of my waist and pulled me in, kissing my forehead and nose, always gentle.

Ben and I had been seeing each other for about six weeks, although most of that time was long-distance. During spring break, we were both home, and one day I’d lost control of my car on a rainy, slick road.

And I’d slammed right into his car. As it was parked at a curb right in front of him and all of his friends. *Yeah, great moment.*

But I played it off. Got out of the car barking at him about his lousy driving and that he better have good insurance or I was calling the cops.

Everyone laughed, and he asked me out.

We spent some time together, went back to school to finish the semester, and reconnected when we came home for summer break.

Since we’d gone to high school together and actually had a date senior year that ended pretty badly, it was kind of fun to catch up after so much time had passed. We got to know each other, and I enjoyed the time we spent together. It wasn’t pedal to the metal from day one. Ben was slow.

And calm.

It was always when *I* was ready. Not when *he* was ready.

And I was nowhere near ready yet, so that was a relief.

And the best part? He wasn’t intense. He didn’t get angry or rude. He didn’t have problems that would make me unhappy, and I didn’t have to worry that he would have so much of a pull on me that I would make decisions based on him.

He never pushed or challenged me, and I liked that I dominated the relationship. I never took advantage of it, but I knew I was the one in control. It was comfortable, but more than that, it was easy. I was never surprised with Ben.

He was safe.

He’d finished his bachelor’s degree in economics at UMass in May and would be going on to graduate school at Princeton in the fall. I’d be heading to Stanford for medical school, so we were looking at more time apart. I wasn’t

sure if the relationship would continue, but right now, I was content to keep things light and easy.

He'd already hinted to me that I should move to New Jersey with him and apply to medical school there or somewhere at least in the vicinity. I'd said no. I'd compromised my college plans once—for a good reason—but I was sticking to the plan this time. Come hell or high water, I was going to California.

“Will you be at my race tonight?” I asked softly.

“Aren't I always?” he answered, and I knew there was a sigh that he'd held back.

Ben hated that I raced. He said he hated the crowd, but I knew it was more than that. He didn't want the girl he was dating racing the boys while he sat on the sidelines.

But even though I liked Ben, I wasn't quitting the Loop, either.

Wisely, he never asked me to stop—just suggested—and I expected that he thought it was something I would grow out of or give up when I went off to Stanford.

But I wouldn't stop for anyone or anything. I wouldn't stop until I was ready.

Madoc whined about my safety, my father chided me about the car costs when I needed parts or repairs, and at least a dozen assholes made snide remarks when I climbed into my car every weekend to race against them.

But none of it made a difference. That's the beauty of knowing your own mind. No one tells you what you can and can't do. Once you're sure of something, it really is *that* easy.

“I'll meet you at the track, then.” I circled his neck and leaned in for a kiss, his gentle lips leaving a feathery kiss on mine. “I need to shower and clean up after I leave here.”

He leaned over, nuzzling my ear. “And then after the race, you're mine, right?”

I could hear the playfulness in his voice, but my heart still skipped a beat anyway.

Mine.

A shiver ran down my arms, and I closed my eyes, feeling a hot mouth move across my cheek and then his breath glide over my lips.

I want to feel what's mine. What's always been mine.

Heat fanned across my face, and need gripped me low in my stomach. His lips brushed mine, never taking, just teasing, and I inhaled a shaky breath as

excitement burned under my skin after so long.

It wasn't Ben.

It wasn't his lips or his breath that I dreamed about.

I want to touch you.

I pushed up on my tiptoes, pressing my body into his and pulling him close.
Jared.

And just like that, I melted at his memory.

"It's too late to beg," Jared whispers as his hand threads through the back of my hair, gripping it tight as he pins me against the wall of the janitor's closet. "This is what you get when you eye-fuck me in the middle of class."

I squeeze my eyes shut and squirm as he pushes his hand inside the front of my jeans and dips his fingers inside me, bringing the wetness back out to swirl around my clit.

"Oh, God," I whimper, my breath shaking as I clutch his shoulders.

"Jared."

He leans in, and I can feel his breath hot across my lips. "I want you naked, Tate," he commands. "Everything off. Now."

I brushed my nose against his neck, smelling Ben's exotic cologne instead of Jared's woody body wash with that hint of spice I still remembered.

I lowered myself back down to my feet, releasing Ben.

Dammit.

Why did the memory of him get me more excited than anyone else could in the flesh? Ben treated me better. His easy demeanor was no threat to me. There were no expectations, and the conversation was safe.

But old habits die hard.

I craved dirty words and rough hands, possessiveness and everything that wasn't Ben's style. I missed being the breath in someone's body and being craved like water.

It was dangerous, but that was young love, and once I had been nearly consumed with it.

"You okay?" Ben asked, looking concerned.

I gave him a casual smile. "I'm fine," I assured him, leaning in for a quick kiss. I might not feel the fireworks with Ben that I wanted yet, but there was no rush. Never any pressure.

I pulled back to say good-bye, but he dove in for another quick peck on the lips before walking back down the hallway, leaving me smiling at his easy attitude.

After logging out on the computer, I jogged to the locker room for my backpack and keys, dumping my scrub shirt in the laundry basket which left me in my super-stylish matching blue pants.

The wind was calling, and I couldn't wait to get outside. I could already feel the chills of anticipation running through my body.

I sent a mass text to Madoc, Fallon, Juliet, and Jax, letting them know I'd be skipping dinner to tweak a few last things on my G8 before the race tonight. I'd meet them at the track.

As soon as I walked through the automatic doors, I broke into a run and couldn't help the laughter that escaped. I'm sure I looked ridiculous, giggling like a child.

But I loved my damn car. It was fast and hot and all mine.

I'd owned my Pontiac G8 since my senior year of high school, and I would admit it only to myself, but it owned more of my heart than Ben did right now. Driving was like a drug. Climb in, sit down, shut up, and hold on. It was the only time in my life when I felt like I was moving but also didn't need to work to accomplish anything. I was going places but not really getting anywhere. For hours on end, I'd drive and listen to music—lost in my own head—but I always seemed to find myself, too. My shower used to be the one place I'd escape to. Now it was my car.

Sliding into the driver's seat, I threw my backpack—loaded with some books and a change of clothes—onto the passenger seat and set down the sushi I was probably going to give to Madoc. I started the car, rolling down the windows and jamming up the music. Saliva's "Click Click Boom" raged out of the speakers, vibrating off my body, and I inhaled the sweet, early evening summer air. It was a little after five, but the sun still shone bright in the sky, and the warm breeze blew through the windows, tickling my hair.

I tightened my hands around the leather wheel, cruising down the two lane highway well over the speed limit and feeling so much more alive behind the wheel than I did anywhere else. This was the one thing I did with my time that I loved.

It wasn't always like that. Two years ago I was connected to everything, each day built the foundation for a tomorrow I couldn't wait to jump into. But now . . .

Now I couldn't help the fear that crept in when I thought about what would happen when I finally got to tomorrow. When I was done with school, when I was a doctor, when I achieved the future I'd worked for . . . what then?

For some reason, driving—racing—kept me connected. Connected to a time when my blood ran hot under my skin and my heart craved more life.

Always more.

Sticking my arm out the window, I smiled at the gush of wind pushing against it as the air blew between my fingers. Cranking up the volume, I inhaled an excited breath as my stomach dropped with the increased speed. I loved those butterflies.

I got back to the house quickly, even though the last thing I wanted to do was get out of my car. But I reminded myself that the wind was waiting for me later on tonight, and it would all be good when I was on the track.

I had a lot of work to do before I left, though, so I parked the car along the side of Madoc's house and grabbed my phone off the seat, instantly feeling it vibrate in my hand.

Peering down, I saw Juliet's name. "Hey," I answered. "Did you get my text?"

"Did you get mine?" she burst out, sounding excited.

I narrowed my eyes in confusion as I climbed out of the car. "No, but I saw you called." I swung my backpack over my shoulder and slammed the door shut. "I just got off work, so I haven't checked my messages yet. What's up?"

I rounded the stone staircase, jogging up the steps to my private entrance. Jared and I used to keep a room here, and I still used it from time to time. Madoc and Fallon were like family, and I'd needed a place to escape to while the entire downstairs of my house was being repainted.

"Where are you?" she asked, and I could hear her excited breathing.

"I just got home." I unlocked the door and dropped my backpack inside, switching the phone to the other ear.

"At Madoc's?" she rushed out.

I nearly laughed at her urgency. "Alright, spit it out. Is something wrong? Did Katherine go into labor or something?"

"No," she shot back. "I . . . I just need you to stop and listen to me, okay?"

I groaned. "Please tell me Jax didn't hack into Ben's Facebook and flood it with gay porn again," I said, kicking off my shoes and walking toward the private bathroom.

"No, Jax didn't do anything," she answered, but then continued. "Well, he kind of did. We all did. I should've told you, and I'm sorry," she rambled, "but I didn't know he was going straight to Madoc's, and I didn't want you to be ambushed, so—"

“What is going on?!” I shouted, pushing open the bathroom door.

“Jared is at Madoc’s house!” she finally cried out.

But it was too late.

I’d already halted.

A lump stretched my throat as I stood there, locking my eyes with his dark ones staring at me through the bathroom mirror, her warning coming a second too late.

Jared.

“Tate, did you hear me?” she yelled, but I couldn’t answer her.

I tightened my fist around the doorknob and glued my teeth together so hard my jaw ached.

He stood at the mirror, with his back to me, and every muscle in his naked arms and torso was steel-rod tight as he leaned down on his hands and held me with a hard stare.

He didn’t seem surprised to see me. And he definitely didn’t look happy.

I inhaled short, shallow breaths. What the hell was he doing here?

“Tate!” I heard someone shout, but all I could do was watch as he straightened and picked his watch up off the counter, fastening it to his wrist as he held my eyes the entire time.

So calm. So cold.

It was like a razor cutting through my heart as I resisted a need to rush him. Maybe to hit him or maybe to fuck him, but whatever it was I was going to hurt him. I cemented every muscle in my body to keep myself in check.

He wore fitted black pants that hung low on his waist, his feet and torso were bare, and his hair was chaos, like he’d just towel dried it.

Our childhood tree filled his back in a stunning black tattoo, and I looked over his shoulder and arms to notice a few new ones.

My stomach shook, and I tightened my abs to resist it.

It had been so long.

His black clothes, his black moods, his nearly black eyes . . . My heart pounded like a drum, and I gritted my teeth, feeling my core tighten.

He looked exactly like he had in high school. Gone was any trace of his ROTC days in college. He was a little more muscular, with more angle to his jawline, but it was four years ago all over again.

I tipped my chin up, seeing him grab his belt off the counter and turn around, walking toward me.

“Tate?” Juliet pressed in my ear. “Tate, did you hear me? Hello?”

He stepped up to me slowly, threading his belt through the loops, and my chest was on fire. My heart couldn't possibly beat any faster, and I hardened my eyes and expression as he stopped a few inches in front of me and hovered.

"Tate," Juliet yelled, "I said that Jared is at Madoc's!"

And the corner of Jared's lips tilted in a smile, telling me he'd heard her futile warning.

"Yes," I answered, clearing my throat as I glared up at him. "Thanks for the heads up," I told her.

And I brought the phone away from my ear and clicked *End Call*.

His arms worked, fastening his belt, but he didn't break eye contact. Neither did I. This was natural for Jared. Hover, make me cower in his shadow, threaten with just his presence . . . but it was all in vain.

Because that's just how well I knew myself now. No one dominated me.

I kept my voice calm, trying to sound bored. "There are about twenty other rooms in this house," I pointed out. "Find one."

His eyes turned from threatening to amused, and it was the exact same look I got in the lunch room the first day of senior year in high school when I'd decided to fight back. Jared always got a rush out of challenging me.

"You know," he started, reaching behind the bathroom door and pulling out a white T-shirt. "I smelled you as soon as I stepped foot into the room. Your scent was everywhere," his velvety voice sent chills over my skin as he continued, "and I thought maybe it was just leftovers from our time here, but then I noticed all your shit." He gestured to the beauty products on the bathroom counter and then threaded his arms into his short sleeves and pulled the shirt over his head.

So he'd come here not knowing he'd find me. At least he wasn't planning anything, then.

He patted his pants pocket and cocked his head, smirking. "I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed a few of your condoms."

My hand suddenly ached, and I realized I'd been squeezing the doorknob this whole time. I didn't know if I was angry that he was referring to my sex life or insinuating plans about his own, but the asshole hadn't changed. He was waiting for me to react.

The condoms were leftovers from a year and a half ago, the last time I had sex. They were probably expired anyway.

"By all means." I plastered a tight smile on my face. "Now, if you don't mind . . ." I cleared the doorway, waving my arm wide and inviting him to get

the hell out.

A million questions raged through my head. Why was he here? At this house? In my room? Where was his little entourage I'd seen him with on TV and YouTube when I'd given in on lonely nights and Googled him?

But then I reminded myself that Jared Trent wasn't a part of my life anymore. I didn't need to care about him.

He brushed past me, grazing my arm, and I started breathing through my mouth, because the smell of his body wash messed with my nerves. With my memories and a time when I was completely his.

I couldn't stand here with him. Not in this room.

I'd never let Ben stay the night when I crashed here, and no one knew, but Jared's and my homecoming photo still sat in its frame, hidden in the dresser drawer. Along with my charm bracelet he'd given me senior year. I'd wanted it out of my house but not gone. Not yet.

This room had played a crucial part early on in our relationship. It was the first space, away from our parents, that was ours—where we could do what we wanted and act the way we chose. To wake up next to each other, to shower together, to make love without fear of who would hear us, to stay up all night talking or watching movies . . . Whether it was the bed, the floor, the shower, the wall, or the bathroom fucking counter, every surface had a memory of him attached to it.

I still couldn't face the fact that I loved being in here, and what's more, I couldn't face the fact that I had never let Ben—or anyone else—stay in here.

It didn't matter, though. It was my room, and I didn't need to explain anything.

I crossed my arms over my chest and watched him clip his wallet chain to his pants and tuck his wallet into his pocket. I glanced over, seeing his duffel on the bed, a few clothes—all black, gray, or white—strewn about.

"Make sure you take everything with you when you leave," I ordered, sliding off my socks and tossing them into the hamper by the door. "This is my room now."

"Absolutely," he said smoothly, and then finished in a hard voice, "Tatum."

I straightened, suddenly feeling the first spark of excitement under my skin—outside of racing, anyway—in a long time. I hated being called "Tatum," and he knew it.

We were back there again.

I looked over at him, tilting my mouth into a smile. "Tatum?" I repeated.

“Those are tactics you come home armed with?” I asked.

He turned his head, eyeing me over his shoulder with a stern expression.

I laughed. “The players might be the same, Jared,” I said, untying my scrub pants and letting them fall down my leg, “but the game has changed,” I warned.

His deep brown eyes flared just slightly as his gaze swept down the long legs that he used to love and back up to my lacy, white underwear.

I turned to step into the bathroom, but I stopped to regard him over my shoulder. “This isn’t high school,” I said, eyeing him playfully. “You’re way out of your depth.”

And then I slammed the bathroom door, cutting off his view.

Chapter 4

Jared

I'd been played.

Of course, my mother's pregnancy had forced me back home, but I should've been warned instead of lied to.

Tate wasn't in fucking Italy.

She was staying with Madoc and Fallon, which Jax should've told me when I'd insisted on coming here first.

But no, he'd let me trail my ass upstairs to shower and clean up while we waited for Madoc to get home, and as soon I opened the damn door to that room, her smell hit me like a ten-ton tranquilizer. I was almost dizzy.

But then I remembered . . .

No. She wasn't here. She was out of the country. The bed was made. The room was spotless. There was no one staying in here.

I'd put my bag down and started to strip as I walked into the shower, but then I noticed that someone was very much staying here.

The same products that Tate used to use for her hair and face hugged the back edge of the sink counter, and then I saw her brush, clogged with her blond hair.

And that's when I knew.

My eyes fell closed, and I froze.

Tate was home.

She was home, and she was staying with Madoc and Fallon, and I immediately wanted to see her.

Was she okay? Was she happy? What would her face look like when she saw me again?

After so long, I just wanted to see her.

Until I noticed the condoms.

She had a small box sitting in her makeup bag, and they damn well weren't ours. After she'd gotten on birth control in high school, we'd stopped using

them.

I pushed away from the sink and nearly ripped off the rest of my clothes, diving into the shower before I broke anything and everything in the bathroom.

I hated her. I wanted to hate her. Why did I still want her?

Fuck!

I kept my head under the hot water for a long time, the loud cascade of heat drowning out my thoughts as I slowly brought myself back down.

The condoms were a trigger—a reminder—that she was having sex with someone else.

I knew that, and she was free to do it. We weren't together, and I shouldn't be upset. She'd never judged me for all the ass I took before we were dating, and her life was none of my business. I shouldn't be mad.

But that didn't stop me. Reason never stopped me from trying to keep her in my orbit. After I got out of the shower, I emptied the box into the toilet and flushed, and whomever she was screwing could go fuck himself.

And that was even truer the second I heard her voice drift in from the bedroom when she'd arrived. I could tell by the one-sided conversation that she was on the phone, and I leaned down, bracing myself on the countertop, knowing she was about to walk in at any second. And then I lifted my head, she opened the door, and . . .

And I held her.

Everything flooded back. Every breath, every kiss, every smile, every tear, everything about her was mine.

Her stormy blue eyes, which have held me captivated since she was ten years old; the heavy rise and fall of her chest, which I'd held flush with mine so many times; and the ten different emotions that crossed her face, each of which had been directed at me at some time or another during high school. They all hit me at once.

I still loved her.

My pulse raced and I could feel it all through my body.

But then she'd stunned me. My natural inclination was to challenge her as I always had, and the words left my mouth without thinking. But she didn't engage. She didn't react.

I was used to Tate's bite. She was a wildcat who pushed when you pushed, but this Tate was on a different level. She was condescending and almost cold. I didn't know this game.

I left the room and charged down the stairs and out the front door, trying to

push her out of my mind. She wasn't the reason I was home after all.

My mother. My unborn sister. My friends.

I headed for the garages, having seen Madoc's GTO finally sitting in the driveway.

The house featured four two-car garages, so I went for the open one and stopped at the entrance, crossing my arms over my chest as I glared at my best friend.

"You don't even look for me when you get home?" I challenged, seeing him pause as he pushed a box onto a shelf.

Turning around, he met my eyes with his annoyed blue ones and arched a brow. "Yeah, that's how it is, isn't it?" His bored tone kind of made me nervous. "Everyone else has to make the first move with you?"

Stepping inside the garage, I kept my stare on him. Madoc wasn't just my friend. He was my family, and no matter what we went through, that never changed. Anger, trouble, differences, and even distance and time wouldn't take my best friend from me. I wouldn't allow it.

"I made the first move," I pointed out. "And the second and third. How many times have I called you, texted, e-mailed—who the fuck even e-mails anymore? But I did it." I inched closer, lowering my voice. "*You* never wanted to talk to me. Why?"

He crossed his arms over his white-T-shirt-clad chest and dropped his chin, looking like he was searching for words. His blond eyebrows dug deep, and I was floored by how different he seemed.

Madoc never shut up. He could vomit story after story and argue any point at the drop of a hat, but now . . .

I shook my head. He was actually speechless.

Or there were things he clearly wasn't sure how to say.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned my head to see Jax slowly stepping into the garage. He hung back and remained quiet, like he was waiting to see what was going to happen.

I twisted my head back around, narrowing my eyes on Madoc. "What the hell's going on?"

Madoc's eyes flashed to Jax, and then he looked at me, letting out a sigh.

Okay, screw this.

I got in his face. "Do you remember when Fallon showed up after high school and left you hanging? You left for Notre Dame and cut everyone off. No calls. No contact. Just gone. We had to track you down. You were our friend and

we weren't letting you go. Now I left and you don't even show the same concern for me?" I bared my teeth. "What the fuck is going on with you?"

Madoc ran a hand through his hair and shook his head.

Finally, digging into his pocket, he pulled out his keys. "Jax and I want to show you something."

As much as I hated riding instead of driving, I decided it was best not to challenge Madoc in his own car right now. Since Jax still drove my old ride, I could push him around, but Madoc and I weren't at our old comfort level . . . yet.

He sped out of his ritzy community of upper-crust homes and down the quiet highway, the day's last light still glowing through the trees on both sides of the road. Jax sat in the back, fiddling on his phone next to Pasha, who had insisted on coming—because she was bored—and Madoc still wasn't talking to me. Framing Hanley's "You Stupid Girl" played over the stereo, and I was still clenching my fists over the buzz running through my body after seeing Tate.

As we entered the more populated part of town and Madoc began navigating the residential streets, I figured out where we were going. We passed our old high school and the same street leading in where I used to watch Tate walking to and from school every day. The same corner where I used to catch the ice cream truck with her when we were younger.

And then we turned onto Fall Away Lane, and Madoc pulled to a halt in front of my old house, which now belonged to Jax.

I rubbed my sweaty palms down my pants, praying like hell that this was going somewhere good instead of bad.

But it took only a glance out the window before I noticed it.

I tried to speak, but my chest tightened and my words came out breathless. "What the hell happened?"

Not waiting for them to answer, I climbed out of the car and traipsed up the incline into the space between our houses. The closer I got, the more I didn't want to face it.

Two cables looped around two branches on both sides of Tate's and my tree and ran into the ground, securing the heavy maple in place. And at the trunk, what looked like some sort of steel brackets cut into the bark on top of and beneath a nearly two-foot slash across the width of the tree. I ran a hand through my hair, stopping mid-stroke as I took in the sight and tried to wrap my head

around what could have done this.

“Tate.” I heard Madoc’s raspy voice from behind me.

But I barely heard him. I approached the tree, running my hand down the jagged trunk to the shallow gash, letting my fingers dip into the cut.

And then the bark bit into my skin as I curled my fist.

“She wouldn’t do this.” I swallowed down the trembling in my throat.

This tree was us. She would *never* do this. She would never try to cut it down!

“After you left, she went cold,” he started, and I felt him approach. “She wouldn’t talk about you. She wouldn’t come home on the weekends . . .” He trailed off, and I wished I didn’t have to hear this.

“I let her have time,” he continued. “I remembered how it felt when I lost Fallon. First loves are the worst pain.”

Except Tate never lost me. I was coming back for her.

“I came home one day the September after you left,” I heard Jax chime in. “And workmen were bringing down the tree.”

No. I closed my eyes.

He continued, “But when they sliced into it, she stopped them. She couldn’t do it.”

“I think she knew you would never have forgiven her,” Madoc added. “And she would never have forgiven herself once she got her head out of her ass.”

I bit the inside of my mouth to stifle my shaky breath. And then I opened my eyes, taking in the damage and almost hating her in that moment.

How could she?

“I understood at first,” Madoc told me. “I was with you the whole way, man. I knew what you needed to do.”

I finally turned around and met his eyes. He and Jax stood back, while Pasha had sat down on the grass with her bag of Sour Punch Bites, playing on her phone.

Madoc continued, “But then she stayed distant—she kept pulling away—and it was like slowly the family was breaking. All of us. She wasn’t Tate without you, and without you both, the rest of us had to struggle to keep things together. To feel normal.”

I dropped my head back, looking up at the bright green leaves fluttering in the early evening breeze. Aside from the gash, the tree looked healthy. It was repairing, thank goodness.

“After a while,” Madoc kept going, “and a lot of persuasion from me, she

started to come around. To find her place without you. I think she felt like the fifth wheel all of the time.”

“I couldn’t be there for you and for her, Jared,” Madoc explained. “I don’t want to go into it. It’s Tate’s business, but I had to choose, and I’m not going to apologize for that. She needed me more.”

While I had a damn hard time understanding why he couldn’t be Tate’s and my friend at the same time, I was glad that if he had to choose, he chose her.

Tate had shut me out, she’d kicked me out, and she wouldn’t return texts or calls. But then I realized it wasn’t just me. She must’ve been different for everyone.

“There’s more,” Jax said hesitantly.

I let out an aggravated laugh, shaking my head. *What now?*

They started walking back from where we came. “Take a look in the front yard,” Madoc called out, gesturing in front of Tate’s house.

I didn’t have to walk far. When I spotted the FOR SALE sign on the other side of the driveway, the ache Madoc’s story had created in my gut turned to full-blown rage in my head.

“What the hell is going on?” I growled, eyeing the tall white wooden pole planted in the grass that hung the FOR SALE sign in full view of anyone who drove by.

Her house is for sale? My eyes shifted from side to side, the flood of thoughts keeping my feet planted to the same spot.

Jax stepped forward. “Tate’s off to Stanford in the fall. Her dad is spending most of his time abroad,” he explained and then approached me. “Last week, he decided to sell, since they’re both home so rarely. He’s buying a house closer to work when he’s in the country.”

“And Tate was okay with that?”

“She had no choice,” Madoc stepped in. “James wouldn’t let her spend her inheritance on buying the house from him. She needs it for medical school.”

I squatted down, running my hand through my hair. I breathed in and out, trying to stay calm, but this shit was flipping my world upside down. Tate’s coldness, the tree, the house . . .

What did I think was going to happen, anyway? That she was going to stay in this house forever? I knew shit was going to change, and I had to accept it. Tate fell away from me, and her life was as it should be. She was moving forward and on track.

But as my lungs filled and emptied, I wished the knots in my gut would

hear what my brain was trying to convey.

Tatum Brandt isn't yours anymore.

But then my fists tightened, and I looked up at her house.

And then at our tree.

And then at my house.

And I couldn't accept that.

Even after all the good in my life—my business, my career, and how I'd grown—I was satisfied but not really happy.

I still loved her. I'd only ever wanted her.

"Are there any offers on it yet?" I asked, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"They've had two," I heard Madoc say.

Of course. No one could refuse a *Leave It to Beaver* house like this. The offers would come fast, and there would be plenty.

"James rejected both, though," he continued. "He doesn't seem to be in too big a hurry to sell. That's why Tate's staying at my house for a few days. They're doing some touch-ups inside for new buyers."

I ran my hand through my hair again, ignoring the fact that Pasha now had her full attention focused on me as she stared wide-eyed, eating her candy. There was only one other time she'd seen me really angry, so she was probably damn well enjoying this show.

I looked up at Tate's house. Perfect white with some summer green trim. A big, beautiful porch. Her manicured lawn sprawling down an easy little hill. I remember loving the sight of the lights glowing inside on cold winter nights as I pulled into my own driveway.

And my fucking eyes started burning, and I had to look away.

The backyard where we made love the first time. Our bedroom windows facing each other. The tree that connected us.

I bared my teeth, inhaling a sharp breath. I'd thought nothing would change.

"Jared." Madoc cleared his throat. "We just told you that your girl tried to cut down your tree. The one you tattooed on your back." His hard voice got louder. "That the house she's lived in ever since you've known her is up for sale."

"She's not my girl," I barked.

"She's not anyone else's, either!" Madoc shot back. "Tatum Brandt loves one person. You. She will always love you." His threatening growl was almost a whisper. "She breathes for you, no matter how much she denies it or tries to hide

it.”

I wanted to believe that was true. That buried inside this new, cold Tate was the girl that still held my heart.

Standing up, I slid my hand into my pocket, my fingers fisting around the familiar round of clay that held her fingerprint. After all this time, I still needed the little thumbprint fossil she’d made as a kid. I couldn’t live a day without her.

“You should’ve come back for her a long time ago,” Madoc scolded.

“I did,” I growled, lashing out at Madoc. “Six months after I left I came back, and she was with somebody else!”

I inched back, my limp hand releasing the fossil and falling to my side as I looked at his shocked expression.

I nodded breathlessly when he remained speechless. “Yeah, I came back, and it was too fucking late, okay?”

Jax knew, but Madoc and I hadn’t been speaking, and from the looks of it, Jax hadn’t told him.

I could still feel everything as if it was yesterday.

I stand at my old bedroom window, stunned and angry. Frozen and hard.

I vaguely recognize the guy. Gavin something. He was from one of her study groups at Northwestern; I’d met him a year ago. I ball my fists. How long did she wait after I left?

Tate is in her bedroom, her arms wrapped around his neck as he holds her close, slow dancing with her. He kisses her, and my stomach coils into a knot.

His blond hair—matching hers—is cropped short, and she laughs as he hugs her close and swings her around.

Six months. She couldn’t even wait six fucking months.

I’d waited. I hadn’t screwed anybody. Not a damn thing but my hand—a pathetic loser still pining for her and believing she would wait. Holding out hope that I could get her back.

My chest caves, and I zoom in on them, hating that she laughs, hating that he dances with her, and hating that she’s moved on.

I still love her. Nothing has faded for me.

I fall into the window, my hands gripping the frame as I watch him kiss her neck. His hands are all over her, and she’s smiling.

Why is she smiling? She can’t want him.

He falls on the bed, taking her with him. She straddles his waist, and I lunge back, jutting my leg out and kicking the glass, hearing it shatter but not staying to survey the damage.

Let her move on if that's what she wants.

I will, too, and everything will be done.

Bolting out of the house, I jump in my car and head back to my hotel in Chicago, where my team is racing.

I'll forget her.

I try to forget her.

But I don't.

I didn't know when she started seeing that guy, but I knew one thing. She was back in the game before I was.

"Gavin," Madoc remembered. "She tried to move on after you left. They dated for a couple of months, but then she broke things off." He looked me dead in the eyes, but I didn't want details.

"I don't care," I maintained. I didn't want his name or the name of anyone else she'd been seeing.

But Madoc pushed on. "She's been single for over a year, Jared," he pointed out. "She wasn't over you, so she cut things off with him when she realized she'd tried to jump back in too fast. It took her a long time to heal, but she needed to try to move on with her life." He looked at Jax and then back at me. "She only recently started dating someone again," he said quietly.

I cast an angry glance at him but kept my voice low.

"Who?"

"She started seeing Ben Jamison over spring break."

Jesus. Ben Jamison?

"As far as I know, though," Madoc continued, "they're taking it slow. It's not serious yet."

I noticed Pasha staring, unblinking, at the spectacle before her.

"What are you staring at?" I growled.

She popped a gummy candy in her mouth. "This is better than TV."

I crossed my arms over my chest, forcing my breathing to calm down as I dipped my head. "If she wants him," I told Madoc and Jax in a calm tone, "then let her be with him."

Madoc let out a bitter laugh. "Take off your pants."

I popped my head up. "Why?"

"Because I want to see what a man with a pussy looks like."

Mother . . . I moved right into Madoc's space, standing chest to chest and glaring down at him.

He fell back a step but stood strong, looking like he wanted to drive a hole

through my head with his eyes.

Jax cut between us, pushing me back as I held Madoc's stare.

"Pasha?" Jax stood in front of me, arms crossed over his chest and looking into my eyes as he spoke to my assistant. "Does my brother drive with a charm hanging on his rearview mirror?" he asked. "It has a thumbprint on it."

I dropped my glare to Jax.

"Yeah," she answered. "And it's around his neck when he's on his bike."

Jax continued, his smug smirk pissing me off. "Does he avoid blondes like a preacher in a pink shirt?"

I swallowed, hearing Pasha's snort. "Can't stand 'em, actually," she answered.

Jax continued, holding my eyes, "Does he have an almost unhealthy obsession with Seether? Specifically, the songs 'Remedy' and 'Broken'?"

"I'm to make sure they're on every playlist," she shot back, repeating my directions to her.

Goddamn it.

Jax dipped his chin, eyeing me defiantly. "Now, we can spend weeks going back and forth. You want her. You hate her. You can't live without her one day. You can't stand her the next. And we'll all be ready to strangle ourselves as you two go back and forth, but let me ask you this." He raised his eyebrows expectantly. "What would you do if Tate was in her room right now, curled up in bed and wearing only a sheet? Where would you want to be?"

My face fell, but my body flooded with heat at the idea of her warm body curled up between the sheets.

He inhaled a deep breath, knowing he had my number. "We want everything the way it was," he said firmly. "And so do you."

I shook my head and turned around, away from their eyes.

Yeah, I was still attached to her. So what?

I was happy with my life.

Pretty happy, anyway.

I was the man I had set out to be for her when I left. With a job I loved, I was able to invest in my future and start my own business. The freedom to make decisions—to spend my days doing work I loved—gave me not only security but peace as well. I had the kids at the track, the work at the shop, and the time and resources to explore my ideas and passion. I was proud of how I spent my days and of the man I'd become.

But my brother was right.

She was and would always be the last image in my head when I fell asleep at night.

I turned around and dug my cell out of my pocket, deciding that he was right. No more fucking around.

“Call my accountant.” I tossed the phone to Pasha. “Buy the house.”

“Jared!” She scrambled off the grass, shock flaring in her eyes. “This house is going to cost everything you have!”

I did no more than raise an eyebrow at her. She held up her hands and looked away, shaking her head. She was pissed off, but she knew the argument was over.

I knew why she was worried, and she had every right to be. She’d put in a lot of work building me, my name, and my business up, and even though it wasn’t her money, she cared about my security. I really liked her for that.

I ignored the slight grins Madoc and Jax flashed to each other and started back toward the car, calling over my shoulder. “And call the guys,” I shouted to Pasha. “I want my car here.”

Tate was right. The game had changed.

She had no idea.

Chapter 5

Tate

I slink through a glob of people, carrying my red Solo cup into the kitchen to refill.

Madoc's house is a mess.

Fallon is having fun—alternating between picking up used cups and chatting with our friends, while her husband is downstairs with Jax, playing pool with some guys. Juliet and I mingle around the party, which is overrun with guests.

Everyone had come home for the weekend, and I'd brought Gavin, as well, trying to get my father used to a new guy in my life.

"Hey," he whispers in my ear, coming up from behind. "I'm thinking it's time to get out of here."

I smile, taking Gavin's hand off my stomach and spinning around.

"I don't know if we can," I state. "We've both been drinking."

Keeping hold of his hand, I lead him to the counter, hearing "This Is the Time" by Nothing More traveling up through the open basement door.

"Madoc will let us use a room. We can just crash here tonight."

My heartbeat throbs in my ears, but I don't say anything. Use a room?

Gavin and I have been seeing each other for about two months, and there is no doubt that we get along. We are both pre-med, in the same academic fraternity, and he gets along with Madoc, although they're not close.

Jax, on the other hand, will still have nothing to do with him.

My father has also had trouble warming to him, and I know why. His relationship with Jared is close, and it's hard to move on. I understand that.

But I'm trying to move forward. Gavin is fun and smart, and when I'm with him, I don't think about Jared.

It's the only time I don't think about him.

I'm trying to find some semblance of happiness again, but instead of getting easier, it's getting harder.

Every day it's more and more apparent that I don't love him, and it's bothering me.

Lots of people have sex without love, but I've realized one thing. It's different. It's not as good.

"I'm sure we could find a room to sleep," I say quietly, giving him a small smile.

He looks at me. "Don't you have a room here?" he asks. "I thought I heard Madoc mention it once."

I stall, trying to figure out how to answer as I dump out my drink and fill my cup with water.

"I do." I nod. "But—"

Then I jerk, seeing some guys crash into the kitchen, coming from downstairs and yelling as they filter down the hallway.

"But?" he presses.

I look back at him, distracted by the noise.

"Hey!" someone shouts. "Check out this video of Trent!"

I blink, dropping my cup in the sink.

Ignoring Gavin, I round the corner and go to where the guys are sitting in the living room crowded around an iPad. Peering over someone's shoulder, I watch footage of Jared—uploaded today, by the looks of it—speeding around a track filled with sharp twists and turns, and even though I can't see his face behind his helmet, I know it's him. I'd know his body anywhere.

I lose my breath watching him as I allow myself a small smile.

God, he's beautiful. The way he leans and steers the bike, in perfect control. And he's doing it.

He's doing what he wants to do and living how he wants to live. I watch, and no matter how much I still hurt, I'm so proud of him.

I feel Gavin at my back, but I don't look. The footage on the YouTube video switches to a commentator, and my stomach knots, seeing Jared in the background.

He's signing autographs for some kids as a few race girls—the ones who work the crowd in their sexy outfits—climb onto the bus behind him. Another teammate clutches Jared's shoulders behind him and whispers into his ear before they both start smiling as if sharing a private joke.

The guy then pushes Jared toward the same bus as the girls and follows him up the steps, the door closing.

"Man, that's the life," a guy off to my right comments.

I back away and try to keep an even-keeled expression, even though my heart feels like it's splintering.

Gavin follows me upstairs, and I don't know why, but I take him straight to Jared's and my room.

I need to do this. I don't want Jared anymore. I don't want the pain. I don't want to take a chance that I'll ever be his and go through this again.

Months of heartache, months of trying to move on, and it still feels like he's everywhere.

I've made love to Gavin, and now I can make love to him in Jared's and my bed, and I will have crossed a boundary from which there's no return. It will kill everything inside of me.

Gavin starts kissing my neck, and a tear falls down my face. My skin feels like it's covered in mud, feeling dirtier the more he touches. I don't want this.

I shouldn't do this.

But I close my eyes and lean my head to the side, inviting him in anyway.

His hands cup my breasts, rubbing them in circles over my shirt as he takes my mouth.

He dips a hand inside my jeans, and I suck in a breath. I clench my thighs to keep him at bay, but I don't know what I want.

Gavin makes Jared go away. Gavin always makes me forget. I can do this.

But I still shake my head.

Every second of this makes me feel worse, and I don't want to use Gavin. To make what we're doing dirty, just so I can feel better.

Jared's voice pours into my head. "You've been turning my world upside down for eight years. I can't get enough of you."

I gasp, choking on tears as I push Gavin away and cover my face with my hands.

"Tate, what's wrong?" He sounds worried.

I shake my head and collapse against the wall next to the bathroom, sliding down to the floor. "You have to go," I cry softly. "I'm so sorry, but you have to sleep somewhere else tonight."

He approaches. "Baby, we can sleep somewhere else. What did I do?"

I shake my head again. "Please just leave."

This is Jared's and my room. No one else's. "Please leave," I cry louder.

"Tate," he presses.

"Now!" I shout. "Just leave me alone."

I put my head down on my knees and cry. I don't know why I feel guilty. I'd

only ever had sex with Jared until Gavin came along. I don't sleep around, and Jared drowned his sadness and pain in plenty of girls before me.

Why couldn't it make me feel better, too?

I cry for a long time, still hearing the music going strong downstairs and not knowing if Gavin left, went back to the party, or found another room.

A hand touches mine, and I shoot my head up, seeing Madoc kneeling down on one knee.

My face cracks, and I can't hold it back. "Why can't I forget him?" I sob.

He closes his eyes, running a weary hand through his hair, looking about ready to cry himself.

Instead he pulls me in and hugs me, letting me release it all.

"When Fallon was sent away," he starts, choking on his own tears, "I tried to get lost in so many other women." I heard him swallow hard. "But it never helped for longer than a day, and I always felt worse later."

I look up at Madoc. "It's been months. Jared's probably moved on, but I don't want anyone else." I'm sobbing, wiping away my tears only to feel more come to take their place. "It hurts. Everything hurts. I almost cut down our tree last fall, Madoc. What's wrong with me? Why can't I get over it?"

He lifts my chin, tears pooling in his blue eyes. "Do you want to get over it?" he asks.

I narrow my eyes. "Of course I do."

He cocks his head. "I think you still love him, Tate, and I think you know deep down, he's going to be back for you."

I sniffle, dropping my eyes. "I can't trust him. Too much has happened." The tears spill over my lips. "Gavin's a good guy. I need to try to move on."

He nudges my chin, urging my eyes back up to his. "You're forcing it," he insists. "Do you remember senior year? You were stronger when you stood on your own, Tate."

Madoc was right.

The next day, I broke off my brief relationship with Gavin and joined my dad and Jax in working on my car, and that spring, I started racing.

It wasn't until recently—more than a year after that talk with Madoc—that I started seeing Ben, taking it slow but testing out the waters for the first time in a long time.

I sat in my G8, the cool black interior and tinted windows encasing me in my own private world as Limp Bizkit's "My Way" droned through the speakers. The crowds milled around outside, already tipping their drinks as they stumbled

around the track, and I held back my little grin, not for once feeling bad that I never joined in. Ben wanted me to. He craved the happy girlfriend who could ease in and out of social situations without complication.

After all, if I was determined to race, why not enjoy the atmosphere and the hype?

But Ben was far too late to make an impression on my personality. I learned back in high school that I was who I was, and I slept a lot better at night when I didn't make apologies for that.

I didn't need them, and I didn't even need the win.

I just need this, I thought as I gripped the wheel and the stick. The blood in my arms felt like it was dancing under my skin, and I was ready.

Yes, Madoc was right.

I was stronger when I stood on my own. And when Jax encouraged me to take up some racing at the Loop, I'd found there was one thing that I did by myself—one thing I owned—that put strength in my veins.

There was no guilt, no pressure—just silence. And I would keep that going when Jared showed up tonight.

Which he would.

I hated to admit it, but he'd put a nice little rush in my blood today. And it wasn't just because of how good he'd looked. Beautiful ink covered more of his arms than it had two years ago, but he still had the same smooth, toned chest that now looked even more incredible, tanned by the West Coast sun.

And of course, all it took was a look for him to get under my skin.

At ten years old, Jared was my friend. At fourteen, my enemy; at eighteen, my lover; and at twenty, my heartbreak. I'd known him more than half my life, and although the roles had changed, his impact was always all consuming.

Always.

I leaned over, digging my mom's *Leaves of Grass* out of my backpack. Tossing the pack into the backseat, out of the way, I opened the paperback, pressing my thumb over the edges of the pages as I fanned them, the soft breeze of the flutter wafting across my face.

Finding page sixty-four, I headed straight for the lines my mother had underlined on verse twenty of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

I whispered, holding the book close to me. "I exist as I am, that is enough."

There were many lines underlined and many poems dog-eared in this old paperback, but I always came back to the ones my mother did herself. Maybe she marked them for herself, or maybe she knew I would need them, but they

were always right there being the voice for me she couldn't be anymore. Even though she died of cancer more than ten years ago, I never stopped needing her. So I carried the book everywhere.

Leaning in, I pressed my nose into the crease and inhaled the scent of old paper as my eyes fell closed.

"Dude," I heard Madoc's voice. "Kinky."

I opened my eyes, letting out an aggravated sigh at his big head sticking through my driver's side window.

You would think Madoc was my boyfriend, as much as he hovered, but it was useless to try to get away from it. He'd texted three times to make sure I was showing up tonight. I'd never missed a race, but I knew exactly why he thought I might duck out. The moron thought I had no self-respect.

"I don't want to talk about it," I warned, tossing the book into the glove compartment—which I always did for good luck—and then climbing out of the car.

"Okay." He nodded, stuffing his hands into his gray cargo shorts. "But if I see you sleeping with your books, I'm staging an intervention." He jerked his chin to the backseat, littered with all of my texts for school.

I shot him a look and walked around the back of my car to attach the GoPro Jax had given me. "I got behind on my summer reading because of my shifts at the hospital," I explained, bending down to affix the camera, "and I want to get through these footnotes by the time school starts."

"You're reading the books in the footnotes?" He looked at me like I was wearing head-to-toe orange.

I stood up, placing my hands on my hips. "Considering you're studying to be a lawyer, it might be a good idea for you to dive deeper into your reading lists as well."

He went wide-eyed. "We have reading lists?"

My eyes rounded, but then he laughed, clearly joking. At least I hoped he was joking. "Well, you're not going into surgery tomorrow," he argued. "So take a breath already."

"I can't." I brushed him off, walking back to my door. "I'm just—"

"Worried you'll start thinking about him?" he finished, and I halted.

I let out a sigh, gritting my teeth. "Not now, okay? Don't you have better things to do? Like your mission to start a soccer team in the Caruthers household as soon as college ended?"

But he ignored me. Before I knew what was happening, Madoc darted into

my backseat and started gathering my books and backpack.

“Madoc,” I scolded, trying to grab my shit. “Give me my books.”

He jerked away from me. “I’ve got them.”

“Now!” I whisper-yelled.

“Not tonight.” He smiled, shaking his head.

“Why not tonight?” I inquired as if I didn’t know where this was going.

But then a husky voice roared over the loudspeaker, and Madoc and I looked up.

“Tate!” My name echoed across the track. “Are you here?”

I grinned and cocked a mischievous eyebrow at Madoc. “Excuse me for a moment,” I said sweetly.

“Oh, of course,” he cooed, bowing his head in reverence with laughter in his eyes.

I rounded the front of my car, hopped on the hood, and stood tall. “Here!” I shouted, feeling the weight of a hundred pairs of eyes fall on me from the surrounding crowds.

Cheers rang out in the night air as people—men and women—howled and clapped, whistled and chanted my name, and I caught sight of Fallon and Juliet over by the bleachers holding up their drinks and screaming their support.

Zack Hager, the announcer, stood up in the viewing stand with Jax, clearly figuring out the evening’s schedule. They only took attendance when someone had canceled. Seeing as how we all had set times before the day of the race, they needed to figure out who was here, so they could push up racers in the line-up.

I jumped back down and eyed Madoc, finishing our conversation. “All of you knew he was coming home and no one told me,” I pointed out. “I’m not mad, but I’m not indulging whatever scheme you’ve worked out. I’m a grownup.”

He pinched his eyebrows together and dropped my back pack. “Puh-lease,” he grumbled.

And the next thing I knew he grabbed me, hooked an arm round my neck—putting me in a headlock—and scrubbed my scalp hard with his knuckles.

“Madoc!” I screamed, planting one hand against his back and one against his bicep as I tried to pull my head out of his hold. “You are not giving me a noogie!”

“Noogie?” he argued. “No, grownups don’t give noogies. And we’re grownups, right?” He carried on, his assault burning my scalp.

“Madoc!” I growled, my voice deep and labored with the short breaths.

“Let me go!” I stomped my foot, finally twisting out of his hold.

He backed off, and I straightened, trying to catch my breath as he laughed.

“You’re a jerk!” I pushed hair out of my face that had been tugged free of my ponytail.

“Yes.” Fallon joined in, walking up with Juliet. “You’re just now learning that?” she teased, winking at her husband.

I huffed, yanking my rubber band out of my hair, because it was a lost cause now.

“Ah, that’s better.” Madoc smiled his approval at my hair hanging loose. I just scowled.

But then something else caught our attention as the crowd around us grew louder, and we all turned toward the track to see what the commotion was.

People moved to the side to clear a path, and I caught sight of Jared as onlookers cheered and screamed.

He was riding his motorcycle from high school—the same one Jax kept in his garage now that Jared had better bikes for racing—and he veered off to the side and backed up into a parking space. It took no time at all before he was swarmed with people: old friends, fangirls, and even fanboys.

I watched as he slipped off his helmet and swung his leg off the bike, flashing a smile to his old friend Zack, and my stomach tightened when I saw a young woman climb off the motorcycle behind him.

I didn’t recognize her, and I ignored the pang of jealousy that she might be someone he brought with him from California.

Everyone was trying to get his attention, and once again, he was the center of everything.

Madoc snapped his fingers in front of my face, reeling me back in. “Are you pissed off?” he asked.

I pursed my lips. “No.”

“Well, you should be,” he shot back. “That’s not his crowd. It’s yours,” he continued. “You’re the one they came to see.”

I inhaled a sharp breath. “I don’t care—”

“Now, some of them have long memories,” he cut me off, “and maybe they’re interested in seeing what crowbars will fly with you two in the same space, but nevertheless, he doesn’t get to steal the spotlight in your show tonight.”

I got in his face. “I couldn’t care less about the—”

But he grabbed my arms, and I was stunned silent when he shook me.

“What do you care about?” he growled, and I felt Juliet and Fallon still beside me.

I sucked in air, shocked at his roughness. I barely blinked as he grabbed the hem of my loose black tank top and ripped a slit up the side.

I gritted my teeth together. “Madoc, what the hell are you doing?” I asked calmly.

He grabbed the two pieces and tied a knot halfway up my stomach. “You’re the queen,” he reminded me and then plucked the backpack off the ground. “You own this track and every driver on it. He’s ignorant of that fact, so educate him.”

I took a deep breath, not wanting him to see the smile I was trying to hide. Yes, this was mine. The track, the Friday nights, and the wins. I didn’t need to engage Jared. But I was going to keep what was mine.

Turning around, Madoc barked one last order before walking off. “Juliet, get her some fucking lipstick, too.”

My eyebrows did a nosedive.

Asshole.

Juliet dug in her bag as I watched Madoc toss my backpack into his car, clearly making sure I didn’t have an excuse to be antisocial even after the races.

I looked down at my shirt.

Such a jerk. Even if I undid the tie, my shirt was still ripped.

“Your husband is—”

“A handful?” Fallon finished, her green eyes smiling. “Yes, he is.”

I jerked as Juliet tried to get some red lipstick on me.

“Stay still,” she chided. “Jax hates gloss, so I found this lipstick that doesn’t get him all sparkly when I kiss him. He loves it, but if it smears on your face, it’ll take more than a little spit to get it off your skin, okay?”

I let her put the damn lipstick on because—I didn’t know why. Maybe it was added armor. Maybe I wanted to be pretty for Ben.

Or maybe I saw Jared take a seat, leaning back on the bleachers, while a girl—a different one than the one I’d seen him arrive with—draped a hand on his knee, interest flaring in every one of her mannerisms.

Maybe I wanted to show him that I didn’t need him to make an impression of my own.

The friend he’d arrived with sat on his other side, looking bored and disinterested. Purple streaks flowed through her jet black hair, and glancing up and down her body, I took in her alternative appearance and wondered at how Jared’s taste had changed.

I had always been edgy but on the socially acceptable side. This girl was beautiful but a lot busier in her hair, makeup, and piercings than I thought Jared would have liked. He'd always said he appreciated my less-is-more attitude.

I guessed that was a lie.

She wore skinny jeans tucked into combat boots and a black sleeveless blouse that draped flatteringly down her body past her hips. Her wrists were adorned with dozens of metal and jelly bracelets while her ears sported metal from the lobe all the way around to the tragus. Her face had a few holes as well.

She seemed like Fallon, only louder.

Seeing Ben approach him—probably to break the ice sooner rather than later—I headed over with Fallon and Juliet, catching Jared's eyes almost immediately.

Madoc leaned into Jared, speaking close, but Jared's gaze stayed on me as Ben grabbed my hand when I came up. I blinked, smiling up at him and hoping he couldn't feel the sweat on my palms.

"Tate." Jared nodded.

I breathed in and out steadily through my nose, keeping my pulse in check. "Jared."

"Your career really took off, man," Ben admired, speaking to Jared.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks," Jared replied without meeting Ben's eyes.

"Clear the track!" I heard Zack holler in the distance as the round-one drivers took position.

"So you two finally got together?" Jared inquired, his words sounding more like a statement than a question.

I arched a brow, turning back to the track and ignoring him.

Ben joined me, taking my lead that I had no intention of indulging a conversation with Jared. Zack announced the next race, and we all watched as he and Jax set up the drivers and sent them off.

The heavy engines shot off, pounding over the screams of the crowd, and I smiled as the cars roared past, the wind sending my hair flying over my shoulder.

Juliet and Fallon chatted, and Madoc hung back, staying quiet. Jared stayed behind me on the bleachers, the heat of his eyes covering my back.

I'd missed that feeling.

"Well," Jared's smooth voice floated behind me. "Our little pond certainly has come a long way, hasn't it? My brother looks like he's outdone himself with the Loop. Some amazing races, hot new drivers . . ."

I slipped my fingers into the pockets of my tight jeans and tilted my chin up, the corner of my mouth tilting in a grin.

“But it’s still a small pond,” he finished, his hard voice dripping with disdain.

When he tore me down in high school it was to feel better about himself. But now it was to get me to react.

I turned around, meeting his eyes but never giving him what he wanted. He could gloat and wear his self-satisfied smirk, but I didn’t play this game anymore.

But much to my surprise, Jared wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t smirking. He wasn’t teasing. His expression was dead cold, and his eyes bored a hole right through me.

There was no anger, no amusement, no threatening tone to his voice . . .

What was he thinking?

“This is Pasha, my assistant.” Jared introduced the goth-looking girl he’d driven in with. He turned to her. “Pasha, this is Tate and Ben.”

Assistant? Yeah, right. Men and women who were attractive and unattached generally weren’t friends. Unless one of them was gay.

“Tate?” Pasha repeated as if she recognized my name, and I saw her shoot a look to me and then back to Jared. “As in . . . ?” she asked him, trailing off as if they shared a hidden understanding.

I narrowed my eyes, noticing that he stayed silent, with his eyes focused out on the race.

And her interested expression turned judgmental as an eyebrow shot up.

She knew something.

I turned back around, just in time to see the racers cross the finish line, and I wondered if Jared had talked about me with her. It would’ve been unlike him. He rarely confided in anyone, so why her?

“Round two!” Zack shouted over the loudspeaker, making me jump.

I looked over the track, my game face lost, and . . .

And now my blood wasn’t dancing under my skin. It was shaking.

Shit.

“On the track!” Zack shouted, and Ben hooked my elbow, pulling me away.

“Shake it off,” he told me, cupping my face. “His being here doesn’t matter.”

I brought his hands down gently, giving him a half smile. I was grateful for what he was trying to do, but I could take care of myself.

I let Ben kiss me on the lips before I turned away and walked to my car, hearing whistles from the guys in the crowd. Even more so this week with Madoc's little impromptu wardrobe alteration on my shirt catching everyone's attention. Sometimes I dressed to kill, simply because it was fun to change it up, but I wanted to be noticed for my driving, not shaking my ass.

Climbing in, I pulled my car up to the starting line and sat next to Jaeger, with Chestwick and Kelley behind us. It was another four-car race, which made it interesting, with the narrow track.

I climbed out of the car to go hear instructions.

All three guys, surrounded by their girlfriends and our friends, crowded around the front of the cars as Jax stood up in the tower doing his techie thing and Zack administered the rules.

I steeled my body, determined that in one minute, I'd be in my car, with my music, and everything else forgotten.

"All right, everyone," Zack rallied us, his bald head shining in the stadium lighting. "It's a four-loop race. The top finishers from last week get the two front spaces this week. No rubbing, and no shenanigans." He pointed around to all of us. "You don't race clean, you won't be invited back."

Rules we already knew and rules that were hard not to break. The track was wider than it had been in high school but not wide enough for four cars. Not rubbing was nearly impossible.

Zack eyed all of us for compliance, and the crowd started chanting names.

"I'm ready," I said, nodding.

Zack peeked over our heads, toward the bleachers.

"Mr. Trent!" He called for Jared, feigning formality. "How about a turn for old time's sake, Mr. Big Shot?" he joked.

He held out his hands, trying to make a big show and get the crowd riled up as they started cheering.

"Sorry, man," I heard Jared say in the distance behind me. "There's only one race I'll take, but I'm not sure she's ready to give me what I want."

"Ohhhh," the crowd nearly panted, and before I let his words sink in, I did an about-face and got into my car without giving him a look.

Everyone cleared the road, and I glanced into my rearview mirror as the engines roared to life. He leaned back on his elbows, looking my way, and I averted my eyes, rolling up my windows and turning up Shinedown's "Adrenaline."

Nothing. I closed my eyes, letting the music sink in. *Nothing was weighing*

me down.

Med school was a done deal. The house wasn't important. Ben was no pressure. Jared was nothing but a temptation that couldn't be trusted.

I was on top of the world.

My car door opened, and I snapped my eyes over to see Jared's "assistant" climbing into the car.

"What are you doing?" I barked, watching her settle back and fasten the seat belt.

"Coming with," she answered, pushing her black-frame glasses up the bridge of her nose.

I stared at her, befuddled, because I wasn't entirely sure if she was trying to be friendly or piss me off.

I cleared my throat and looked at her. "You're sleeping with my ex-boyfriend," I pointed out. "Get out."

She reached over, turning down the volume on my stereo.

"I'm not sleeping with Jared," she corrected. "I have never slept with Jared, nor do I ever want to."

I narrowed my eyes, studying her.

She nodded, allowing, "Although we are close, even though he likes to pretend we're not. I saw him almost cry once, and it kind of made me like him more despite the fact that he maintains it never happened," she explained. "But he's not my type, and I promise you of that."

She looked at me firm and serious, and I kind of believed her.

And then I wondered why I cared.

I turned the volume back up. "Out," I ordered, but then she turned it back down.

"I'm bored," she argued. "And I'd like to experience my boss's humble beginnings. If you're lucky, I may start to like you."

I rolled my eyes.

I saw Zack get up on the podium with his megaphone, and I checked to make sure I was in first gear.

"You're a distraction," I blurted out, wishing she'd get out of my car. I was tempted to get someone to haul her out, but it would waste my time.

"I'd say you were already distracted," she retorted, and I snapped my eyes up at her, catching her insinuation.

"Ready!"

I jerked my gaze back out the windshield, not feeling ready.

“Set!” I heard him call, and I blasted the music, shooting her a warning look.

Why was she in my car? Why did she think I was distracted?

And shit, how many laps was I doing again?

Uh . . . four. Four laps. I nodded to myself. *Yeah, four.*

“Go!” he shouted, and I sucked in a breath, gassing the damn car with all of my might.

I yanked the stick down into second and up into third, smoothing into my gears like always. My car was a part of me, and I checked my rearview mirror, seeing two of the cars still behind me and Jaeger at my side.

Coming up on the first turn, I let Jaeger go ahead, and I drifted behind him around the turn. I skidded, going to the outside, but not having to slow nearly as much.

“Whoa!” Pasha shouted as we raced, and I shot down into fourth as I slammed my foot down on the gas and sped ahead, now in front of everyone.

I’d love to say it was merely skill, but the car was a huge part, as well. The size and maneuverability were strong factors.

I shot up into fifth and down into sixth, hearing Pasha’s excited breaths next to me. “I thought hanging out in the racing world, you’d be used to this,” I challenged, seeing her holding the handle above the door as I tried to keep my mind off Jared, who was no doubt watching my every move out here.

Pasha breathed hard. “I drive for fun, and I watch races, but I’m hardly ever the passenger.” She shook her head, smiling. “It’s different.”

I almost smiled back. Yeah, she was right. Riding with Jared had been a huge rush. No control—you just rode and put your life in someone else’s hands.

It was an entirely different experience but still as exciting.

I rounded the next turn and the next, slowly starting to relax.

I finally turned down the music. “You don’t know me, okay?” I told her, setting the record straight. “Whatever Jared told you . . .”

I felt her eyes on me, and even though I wanted to know what she knew, I wasn’t opening this up for discussion.

No one—especially people I didn’t know—made me feel bad about myself. And her look at me earlier had made me shrink.

“The guy you’re dating?” she started softly. “Ben? He’s a lifeline to you. Something to hold on to so you don’t sink, right?”

I peered over at her, confused and shocked at the same time. *Lifeline?*

“You know how I know?” she asked. “Because you’re a strong woman, and

he's too weak for you. You can't possibly respect him."

"That's ridiculous," I snapped. "You don't know us. You just met us. He's a good guy, and I like him a lot."

"I'm sure you do," she shot back, sounding amused. "As a friend."

I squeezed the wheel, racing past the finish line and continuing for the first turn again.

"He does what you tell him to do," she went on. "He doesn't argue, and he doesn't run away. He's easy to handle, right?"

When I said nothing, she continued, "Jared kept trying to get under your skin earlier, and Ben should've reacted," she mused. "As the guy you're dating, he should've taken offense—at least a little bit—but he was too much of a coward."

I chewed the inside of my lip, fire burning down my leg as I floored the gas.

"You're strong," Pasha gauged. "Someone who likes to be in control. But wouldn't it be exhausting—not to mention boring—always being the one in the lead? Never being challenged?"

I turned up the music again and shook my head.

Ben wasn't boring.

He might not get me hot, but he also wasn't rude, aggressive, and complicated. And I didn't need to explain myself to—

"Jared, though?" she chirped over the music, cutting off my train of thought. "I can imagine that relationship threw you on the ground and fucked the daylights out of you, huh?"

I turned my wide eyes on her, barely noticing Jaeger's car zooming past me.

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," she added.

I breathed out a nervous laugh, stunned into silence. I had to hand it to her. She was bold.

I charged ahead, powering around the turn and missing Jaeger's car by a hair. I sped on, taking the lead again as I tightened every muscle in my body and raced hard, jerking the wheel wildly and making her laugh as I skidded around the corners.

Flying across the finish line two more times, I barely bothered to downshift as I turned, feeling the weight of the car pulling and our bodies trying to go with it.

She started laughing, nervously glancing behind her.

"Go, go, go!" she shouted, smiling from ear to ear.

"You're very weird, you know that?" I commented.

“I consider that a compliment.” She beamed.

Jaeger’s orange Camaro pulled up on my side, and I swerved into his lane to cut him off, knowing that we’d bump on the next turn if he was too close. Backing off, he pulled behind me, honking his horn furiously.

I raced ahead, feeling the energy down to my bones the way I always did here.

But it was more than that, too. It didn’t feel like it was going to be over when the race ended as it usually did.

Tearing across the finish line, I let out a happy laugh, pounding my steering wheel with the adrenaline built up inside of me.

“Woo-hoo!” Pasha screamed, rolling down the window and howling.

I sucked in air, breathing hard as I spoke to her. “So was that boring?”

She acted like it was no big deal. “It didn’t suck.”

The crowd descended, pounding the roof, and I moved to get out of the car so I could smack one of them, because who the hell thought it was okay to pound on my car?

But Pasha grabbed my arm, and I stopped to look back at her.

“You should ask Jared about the one time I *almost* saw him cry,” she said, her happy face turning serious. “I’m sure you’d find it very interesting.”

Chapter 6

Jared

Jax stood up in the announcer's stand, peering down at me with a grin on his face that said I was way out of my depth. Yeah, I was kind of getting that.

Tate was different.

I shook my head and turned my gaze back to the track, seeing her hop out of her car and talk with the other drivers. So confident. So strong.

But the way I wanted her was still the same.

Jax was right. I could go around about it for days or weeks or another two years, but I'd still come to the same conclusion as he did this afternoon. I loved Tate, and I would always love her.

I'd never planned on letting her go. Not really. Seeing her with someone else a year and a half ago threw me for a loop, and I thought that maybe I still wasn't good enough, maybe I couldn't live up to him, maybe she was finally happy after all the pain I caused, and maybe, just once, I could think of her happiness and leave her the fuck alone for once in my life. Maybe, just maybe, we weren't meant to be together.

But there were no maybes now. I wanted her back.

For good.

"Girl," one of the racers drawled, wrapping an arm around Tate's neck as she made her way through the crowd. "I could've won that race. You know I backed off out of pity."

One corner of her lips tilted in a smile as she made her way back over to where Ben stood a few feet away from me.

"We've raced three times," she pointed out, eyeing him. "Why keep racing me if you're purposely going to lose every time?"

I laughed under my breath. "Well, if he beats a girl," I mumbled, pretending to fiddle on my phone, "what has he really won?"

I heard Madoc's snort from a few feet off, and I swallowed, immediately regretting the words.

Awesome. What the hell was wrong with me? No matter how much I liked to think that I had grown up, being around Tate brought out the bully all over again.

I could practically feel Pasha's eye roll next to me, and silence fell on Tate's conversation telling me they'd all heard the insult.

"You don't believe that." Tate's flat voice sounded so sure, and I knew she was talking to me.

I looked up, stuffing my phone into my back pocket as I stood.

"You're a lot of things," she continued, folding her arms across her chest, "but you're not sexist."

"Look who knows me so well," I taunted, acting like her boyfriend wasn't even there.

And he wasn't. He didn't matter.

Tate cocked an eyebrow. "You're not hard to figure out, Jared."

"No, I'm not," I agreed. "I'm just bored."

"Hmmm," she nodded, shooting me with her fake, sympathetic gaze.

"That's right. This is all beneath you now, isn't it? We're simply the amateurs entertaining you with our mediocrity." And then she raised her voice, stepping closer as she spoke to those around us. "He can take stories of us back to his hot shot friends, laughing about his 'roots' . . ." she stopped to add air quotes, much to the enjoyment of everyone listening. "And how far he's come while we're all still muddling along in this no-name town."

I rolled my eyes, knowing how wrong she was. I loved the Loop and my home, and I never let any success I gained go to my head. Anything I said or did to give that impression was simply to get under her skin.

I heard a throat clearing behind me and looked over my shoulder to see Fallon and Juliet smiling in support of their girl. I was kind of alone. Jax was up in the announcer's stand and Madoc was off to the side, clearly not picking a side and just enjoying the show as his eyes shot between Tate and me.

"But if I remember correctly," Tate spoke up again as conversations around us halted and people started listening, "Jared did say he wanted to race, didn't he?" she asked the crowd, looking around and egging them on.

They cheered and laughed, clearly liking where she was going with this.

"Tate?" I gritted out, warning her, but she ignored me.

"Yes, yes, he did say that, didn't he?" she shouted, now having everyone's attention. "He said he wanted a race, and I think Zack and Jax would be more than happy to adjust the schedule for such a prestigious Loop alumnus."

I shot a hard look up to the stand, seeing my brother leaning down on the railing grinning his ass off.

I took a deep breath, crossing my arms over my chest. "I said I wanted one race," I clarified to Tate. "One race with one driver in particular."

She knew what I wanted. What was she doing?

She turned around, looking into the crowd. "Derek! Derek Roman, where are you?"

"What?" I heard his deep voice from off to my right.

Cocking my head, I saw Roman coming through the crowd, using a shop cloth to clean off his fingers. He must've been under the hood of a car.

After all this time, he hadn't changed much. Still looked like a fifties greaser reject with his slicked black hair and plain T-shirts. We used to run into each other a lot at the Loop when I was in high school, and I knew he worked the Loop with Jax now, helping out and such, but I hadn't talked to him. We didn't get along, and Tate knew that.

"You and Jared have unfinished business," Tate reminded him, and I immediately felt the irritation pool under my skin when I realized what she was doing.

"Your last race together was a tie, wasn't it?" Tate knew the answer. She was merely reminding everyone.

"No." Roman shook his head. "I won that race."

"Like hell you did," I blurted out, feeling my rival's challenge like a hot poker in my side.

He laughed, sounding condescending, and I looked over to see Tate's lips curl in mischief as she held my eyes.

"Derek," she said softly. "How about a rematch? Your Trans Am against Jared's bike?"

"That's a dumb race," Roman shot back.

"I agree." I hooded my eyes in boredom. "He has no chance."

"Fuck you," he growled.

"Fuck you," I mumbled, barely meeting his eyes.

"Tensions are hot, everyone." Tate looked to the crowd, holding up her hands. "What do you say?"

I shifted in irritation as the noise became deafening. Shouts, howls, and cheers rang out in the hot, night air, and I really wanted to shut her up. Like really shut her up.

"I'm not taking this race!" I heard Roman shout. "A sport bike against my

car? That's not fair!"

"Exactly." I nodded, inching toward Tate and ignoring Ben's rigid stance beside her. "And I have nothing to prove, so why would I do this?" I asked her.

"Because if you win," she replied, "you can race me." And then she looked to Ben. "You okay with that?"

He cocked an eyebrow, his hard stare turning amused. She didn't need his permission to race, but she was asking him out of respect. Racing her ex-boyfriend—or engaging in any activity with an ex-boyfriend—was crossing a line.

"I'm not worried," Ben replied, meeting my stare head to head as he spoke to her. "He'll choke on your dust, babe."

Ohhs filled the air, and I inhaled a deep breath, just about done tolerating him.

"Well, what about me?" Roman whined. "What do I get?"

Tate walked past me, and I watched as she leaned in close, covering her lips with her hands as she whispered something to him. His eyebrows dug deep and then shot up in surprise, and I immediately knew she had sold him.

I could race him and win, getting what I wanted from her—a little more interaction—but what the hell did she promise him?

He smiled and shrugged. "Okay," he called out. "Clear the track, everyone!" And he raced off to get his car, I would assume.

Cheers rang out as everyone scurried off the track and huddled to the sides, making room for his car and my bike.

And I just stood there, wondering what the hell had just happened. I ate guys like Roman for breakfast. This wasn't a race. The maneuverability of my bike alone was an unfair advantage against him.

"What did you promise him?" I asked as Tate walked by.

"I promised him he would win," she called over her shoulder, following Ben off the track.

I followed. "On no planet would he ever win against a sport bike. Or me." I added.

She reached over, grabbing my helmet off my bike handle and tossing it to me. "Get it on, get on the starting line, and prove it."

She stood there, seeming so sure about herself. So calm and unaffected, and I didn't like this. Any of it.

I missed my Tate. The wildcat who fought back and smiled because she was happy, not because she was planning something to make me squirm. This new

cool and calculated woman was a little scary, and I couldn't keep up.

She walked away, and I swung my leg over my bike, starting it and revving the engine, the high-pitched whir loud enough to drown out any other noise here tonight. I pulled up onto the track and lined myself up next to Roman's 2002 Pontiac Trans Am.

I loved to race, and even though this didn't even compare to my usual venues, my heart still pounded like a two ton hammer.

Jax came over, affixing two Go Pros to my handlebars, one facing the track and another facing me. "She's changed," I commented to him, slipping on my black helmet.

He nodded, keeping his eyes focused on his task. "She's definitely harder to impress now, so step up your game."

I didn't want to step up my game. I didn't want to play any game period. I just wanted to take her somewhere. Cry, fight, even let her hit me, but at the end of it all, she'd be in my arms, her storm blue eyes looking up at me and desperate for only what I could give her. That was my Tate.

I jerked, feeling a hand squeeze my shoulder, and I looked behind me to see Tate climbing on the bike in back of me.

What the . . . ?

"What are you doing?" I barked, noticing her clasp Fallon's half-helmet to her head.

"Riding," she chirped. "It's part of the deal."

"Oh, hell no!" I growled, twisting my head farther around to scowl at her. "It's too dangerous. Get off!"

"If I don't go with you, then you don't get your prize if you win," she explained, her voice calm and even. "And if you back out of the race now, everyone will think you're scared." She shrugged. "Or too stuck-up to indulge us."

"I don't—"

"Oh, look," she interrupted, jerking her chin in a cheery voice. "Here we go."

I darted my gaze to Zack coming off the announcer's stand and back at her as she adjusted herself on the rear seat.

I breathed in and out, not knowing what to do. *Shit!*

"Derek Roman," Zack boomed through the megaphone, "and Jared Trent last raced five years ago this fall! It was one of the most memorable nights we had here . . ."

“Get off!” I whispered over my shoulder to Tate.

“Not happening,” she shot back. “Can’t make this too easy for you, can we?”

My eyes nearly bugged out as realization hit. *Fuck*. I twisted around to say more, but Zack spoke up again.

“Because it was also the first time we ever saw Tatum Brandt race!” he continued. “To solve the tie between Jared and Derek, we had their girlfriends race. However, the score never really felt settled, and now, five years later, we can give everyone a chance to see who the real winner is!”

Cheers and excited laughter rang out, and I looked over my shoulder, growling low at Tate.

“Get off now,” I ordered. “I can’t race with you hanging on to me!”

I heard her snort as she wrapped her arms around my waist and leaned down into my back. “It’s just a little pond, Jared,” she taunted, throwing my words back at me.

I shook my head, gritting my teeth.

She wasn’t going to let me race without her on the bike. I couldn’t race like I normally would for fear of hurting her. And backing out now wasn’t a choice because . . .

“Are you ready gentlemen?” Zack called, and I groaned.

“No,” I answered under my breath. And then I called behind me, “You better hold on.” I revved my engine as Derek’s Trans Am rumbled next to me.

Tate tightened her arms around me, and I wondered what Ben thought of all this. He was no doubt watching. Had Tate warned him before climbing on behind me?

“I’m going to get you back for this, you know,” I threatened her.

She nuzzled in close, her breath tickling my ear. “You can try.”

A smile tugged at my lips that I wouldn’t let loose.

“Ready!” Zack called, and I faced forward, tensing every muscle in my arms.

“Set!” Tate went rigid against my body.

“Go!”

Liquid heat flooded my body, and screams filled the air as we shot off, our tires spinning, kicking up smoke and the smell of hot rubber as we launched down the track.

My rear end wobbled with the extra weight I wasn’t used to, and I gripped the handle bars tighter, trying to stay straight. Derek shot off ahead of me, but I

picked up speed immediately, accelerating ahead of him as Tate let out an excited laugh. Her scared arms tightened, and I loved feeling her warmth at my back. I always loved her on my bike.

But as we rounded the first turn, I immediately slammed on the brakes.

“Shit!” I growled, feeling the full measure of the extra weight behind me carrying me to one side and messing up my balance. I couldn’t round corners the way I was used to in races—speeding ahead and bending low to the ground—because I wasn’t on my racing bike, and I wasn’t alone.

Tate gasped, her body settling on my back, since she was seated higher up and leaning down.

I brought my foot down, grazing the ground as I rounded the corner and feeling her wobble at my back. Derek honked his horn, skidding behind me, and I slammed on the gas, charging ahead right after him.

I felt Tate’s chest shake against my back, and I knew she was laughing. I hardened my jaw.

At least she was quiet about her gloating.

I picked up speed, able to go much faster than Roman, but the turns killed me. It was no use.

He was able to make corners faster, because he didn’t have to slow down as much—or worry about the safety of another person in his car—and I couldn’t concentrate, because Tate was on my body and in my head, and she knew what she was doing. I couldn’t race like this.

My balance was off, and she knew I was worried about hurting her. In a car, she was somewhat shielded, but out here . . . I was scared shitless, and I wouldn’t take the chance. She shifted, we wobbled, and there was no way I could protect her if something happened.

By the time we rounded the fourth turn, Derek was already nearing the finish line, and I felt my stomach roll as I cruised past, pulling to a slow stop past the announcer’s stand and feeling the heat of embarrassment cover my skin.

Dammit.

Roman was crowded with spectators, and he climbed out of his car, smiling ear to ear.

I pulled off my helmet, having never felt so fucking humiliated.

I’d just lost a bike race to an old rival I could barely stand in front of a hundred people I went to high school with.

I’m not going to kill her. I won’t hurt her.

But I was going to do things to her. I slammed my helmet down on the

handle bar. *Lots of fun things.*

I hung my head, breathing in and out steadily as Tate climbed off the bike and stepped up to my side, removing her helmet.

“You know,” she started, looking off toward Roman, “You made him pretty damn happy. Derek doesn’t really have that much going on in his life,” she told me, looking thoughtful. “He has some friends and the Loop, but that’s it. He’ll never be one to rise high or have the world at his feet. This will probably keep him high for a month.”

Her mouth tilted in a little smile, and I looked over to see him laughing with his friends, enjoying the praise and admiration. The win clearly made him feel good, and it probably made him look good. I looked at Tate, realizing what she was doing for him.

I shook my head and gave a half smile. “What did you promise him if he won?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “I just guaranteed him he would win.”

“You were that sure,” I said, knowing she must’ve told him her plan to ride with me.

She nodded. “He likes me and trusts me. More than he does you.”

“Great,” I bit out.

She jerked her chin. “Look at him, though.” She smiled. “This is probably the best he’s felt in a long time.” And then she looked back at me. “He doesn’t need a reward. He just needed the win.”

I looked over at Roman, realizing she was right. He wasn’t a threat to me anymore, and I had a lot to be happy about. No harm done.

She let out a hard sigh. “But this really sucks for you, though,” she teased, fake sympathy written all over her face. “Jared Trent, up and coming motor bike racer for CD One Racing losing to an amateur on this small pond?” She laughed. “Yikes.”

And I watched her walk away, my face hardening as she went up to Ben and wrapped her arms around him.

I climbed off my bike, staring after her.

It was definitely time to step up my game.

It wasn’t a turn-on a year and a half ago, so why the hell was I turned on now?

I shifted slightly in my seat, the swirl of heat shooting from my stomach to

my groin, and I watched, wanting him to touch her.

I actually wanted it.

I dared him to slide his fucking hand higher up her thigh, so I could feel more of what I'd missed feeling the past two years.

Only Tate did this to my head. Only she twisted my body up like this.

Nothing had changed.

"Jared, what are you doing?" I hear Pasha's breathless voice as she shoves the hotel room door open.

I tip back the rocks glass and down the rest of the whiskey, the thick burn tearing up my throat before it warms my stomach. Dropping the glass to the floor, I fall back onto the bed—one of many beds on which I'd slept alone, completely faithful to Tate—and I feel the tears wet the corners of my eyes. But I tighten my jaw, refusing to let them fall.

I just want everyone to leave me alone.

I breathe in through my nose, defiant, willing myself to either forget or accept what I'd seen tonight through Tate's bedroom window.

She had a boyfriend.

The ceiling spins above me, and I bring my hands up to my head, digging my palms into my closed eyes.

Six months ago, Tate loved me, and now I was nothing. The last time I was nothing to her—the last time she talked tough and tried to convince me that I didn't matter—I'd stolen our first kiss.

And I knew she had lied.

But now . . . she'd shown me that she was forgetting me.

I feel like I did in high school. Before she was mine.

I can't stop the first tear from falling. "Tate," I breathe out, wiping my face quickly.

"Who's Tate?" Pasha sounds worried, and I know she doesn't understand any of this. "Jared, are you crying?"

"Just get out," I growl.

I gave her my extra key, so she could get in to get anything I might forget for tomorrow's race, but unfortunately, she must've heard my commotion when I kicked over the portable bar and broke a bottle earlier.

"You have a race at ten a.m.!" she shouts. "You have to be at the track by seven, and you're drunk off your ass!"

I shoot up into a sitting position. "Out!" I bellow. "Get the fuck out!"

"What the hell's going on?" I hear a male voice and instantly know it's

Craig Danbury, the team's manager.

"Oh, my God," he swears under his breath, probably taking in the sight of my drunken disarray.

I don't look up from my hands, but I see his shoes near the door.

"What the hell is wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Pasha says. "And I don't know if he's going to be okay tomorrow."

I press my head between both hands, unable to concentrate on anything except her. She didn't wait for me. Why didn't she wait?

Anger charges through my body, and I want a fight. I want to hit someone.

"He better be okay," Craig snaps. "I don't care what you have to do. Get him a girl or a pill . . . just get him back to one hundred percent by morning."

I hear him leave, and I shake my head. I'm losing control, and I hate this feeling. I never wanted to feel this again.

Pasha's hands land on my forearms as she kneels in front of me.

"Jared," she pleads, "tell me what the hell happened."

I close my eyes, feeling like my body is swaying. "I lost Tate," I whisper, my eyes burning.

"Who's Tate?" she questions. "Is he a friend of yours?"

I let out a bitter laugh, kind of liking the sound of that. I wish our new neighbors ten years ago had had a boy instead of a girl. I wish Tate was a guy I'd gone to school with instead of the girl I liked, bullied, and then fell in love with.

I wish my world had never revolved around her. Maybe we both would've been happier.

"Drink this," Pasha orders, handing me a bottle of water.

I grab it lazily and unscrew the cap, downing the bottle. When I finish, she pushes another one at me.

I shake my head. "Enough. Just leave me alone."

"No," she pushes. "You have a race tomorrow. A responsibility to me and your team. Drink this and then go get in the shower, while I go rustle up some aspirin and food. We need to get the alcohol out of you."

She leaves, and I suck in air, trying to ignore the knots in my stomach that I know aren't from the liquor. Gulping down the second bottle of water, I rise on shaky legs and tear off my jeans and boxers as I make my way to the bathroom.

I don't want a life without Tate. I don't want anything without her.

Stepping into the shower, I stumble as I turn on the water. I jerk when the

heat hits my body, and even though I should be under a cold spray to sober me up, the hot rush eases my nerves.

I drop my head forward, letting the cascade run down my neck and back, and I suddenly feel the first drop of peace I've felt all night.

Tate's been everything to me for so long, and somehow I thought she always would be. I never doubted it.

In fact, I'd gone to great lengths to stay in her life, be it for good or bad.

And that's when I realize it. I had given her too much power over me.

My first instinct tonight when I saw her with another man was to hit someone, yell at her, confront them both, but something inside held me back.

I'd always crowded her, pushed her and fought with her, and I didn't want to be that guy anymore. I left in the first place so I could grow up.

I hear the bathroom door shut, and I pull back the curtain just an inch to see a young woman leaning against it.

She watches me, and I smooth my hair over the top of my head, trying to place her. She looks vaguely familiar.

"Who are you?" I ask, thinking she might be a groupie or someone's assistant, but I hadn't paid any attention to other women in a long time, so I wasn't sure.

Her big brown eyes look shy. "Pasha thought you might need a backrub," she replies, her voice sounding so innocent.

I narrow my eyes and watch as she slowly starts to take off her clothes, holding my gaze the whole time, as her meaning becomes clear.

I still, slowly releasing the air in my lungs.

Her light brown hair falls over her shoulder, and my heart rate picks up as piece by piece, everything comes off and she stands naked in front of me.

I whisper under my breath, willing myself to tell her to go.

Just tell her to go.

She's quiet, but I catch the hint of playfulness in her eyes as she cocks her head at me, waiting for an invitation.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asks gently, everything in her look telling me she knows I won't.

I let my eyes trail down her body, and I can almost feel how warm she would be if I touched her.

How nice it would be to have someone in my bed.

I want her to leave, but I don't want to be alone.

Tate's smiles float through my mind, and I steel my jaw as the girl

approaches, her presence making the hair on my arms stand up.

She looks up at me with a small smile, and I start to grow hard as I think about her open for me on the bed. I can close my eyes and go at her, get lost in the act and let go of my anger and pain and use her like I have so many other women, but . . .

But I never gain anything from it.

Tomorrow, I'll hate myself and the cheap act, because nothing compares to fucking someone you love.

Needles prick the back of my throat, and I swallow the lump. "Yeah," I rasp, looking down at her. "I want you to leave."

Confusion and a hint of hurt flash through her eyes as she shifts her gaze, probably trying to make sense of why I don't want her.

I close the shower curtain and finally hear the door open and close, and a wave of relief hits me. For a moment, Tate fades in my head, and every inch of my body feels the gust of a second wind.

I'd let my need for Tate make me do so many bad things in the past and make so many wrong decisions, and I hadn't realized how much I still lacked control over my own happiness.

She had been everything, and I'd held myself back, acting out and making all the wrong choices, because my head had been so clouded with her—and I'm not doing it anymore.

I get out of the shower, wrap a towel around my waist, and go to bed.

I have a race tomorrow.

A couple of women came and went over the next year and a half, but it was never because I was angry or wanting revenge. I was trying to move on just like Tate had been. I had wanted to go back and fight for her, but not until I was sure I was going to be good for her. And maybe she wouldn't want me anyway, since she'd moved on. So I let it be.

For a year and a half, I warred between what I wanted and what I thought was right. Either take her back and love her forever, or leave her alone, because all I've ever caused her was pain.

But when I came home today and saw her again, that was it. The battle in my head wasn't there anymore.

She belonged to me. I was built for her.

I looked over, across the dance floor, her table full of our friends and their drinks, while Ben had his lazy hand resting low on her thigh, and I steeled my jaw to prevent the smile.

That touch wasn't going to do it for her.

Not for her.

Tate wasn't a slow burn. She liked to be fed on.

Halestorm's "I Get Off" played over the sound system, and some of our old high school friends sang along on the dance floor. I smiled to myself, remembering how that song always reminded me of her and how we grew up with our windows facing each other. She had a lot of fun taunting me with that window when we were together.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I slid my thumb over the screen to see a text from Jax.

What are you planning to do when she leaves with him tonight?

I locked eyes with my brother across the dance floor as he flashed me a small, all-knowing grin.

Asshole.

My phone buzzed again.

You have no idea, do you?

I dumped my phone on my table and shot him my middle finger. He laughed and looked at Madoc, who shared his amusement.

What was I supposed to do? Drag her to my car by her hair? Yeah, that would win me points.

But he was right. There was no way I could live with her going home with someone else. As much as I'd learned to control my temper, she was a trigger.

Whatever fling she'd had a year and a half ago, I'd been around to witness only a few minutes of it. Now it was a different matter. Ben wasn't a bad guy, and Tate knew him somewhat well. Shit could escalate quickly between them.

The girl next to me leaned into my arm, and I looked down at her, almost wishing that I could take her home. I was overloaded with energy and adrenaline, and I wanted a girl in my bed tonight.

I could pretend I was going to take her with me. I could talk myself into it and let her body get mine worked up to where I'd shut off, dive in, and play for a while, but I'd be forcing it. There was only one girl I wanted and who knew

exactly what I liked.

“Asshole!”

I jerked my head to the dance floor to see Pasha shoving a guy away from her.

Great. Annoyance flooded me like a rain shower, and I stood up, letting the girl’s hand fall off my thigh.

Pasha had gotten just drunk enough to let a guy dance with her, and now she’d come to her senses, not wanting the attention.

The guy—late twenties from the looks of him—smiled wide and grabbed her hips, pulling her into him.

“Stop!” Pasha shoved his hands away again, and I walked over, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

The dance floor was practically shoulder to shoulder, so their struggling wasn’t going unnoticed. Madoc, Fallon, and everyone else at their table were craning their necks to see what the commotion was about.

The guy grabbed her arm.

Shit.

I pushed through the crowd in just enough time to catch Pasha slapping him across the face.

“You bitch!” he yelled, holding his face.

I jumped between them, standing in front of Pasha.

“Back off,” I gritted out to the guy, bearing down on him as he tried to advance.

“She hit me!” he snarled.

I inched into his space, keeping my eyes locked on his. “Better her than me,” I threatened.

The dude paused, probably weighing his options, before he turned around and walked his ass off the dance floor. I let out a breath, just as aggravated with Pasha as I was with him. She did this a lot. Letting some guy think they had a chance, only to beg off when she realized she didn’t want them after all. She needed to stop trying to be someone she wasn’t.

I turned around. “Are you okay?” I asked, but she wasn’t looking at me. Chewing her bottom lip, she shook her head.

“I’m gay, aren’t I?” she murmured, as if just realizing it.

I nodded, snorting. “I know.”

Her head shot up, and her eyes narrowed in surprise. She actually thought no one suspected.

“My father hates me,” she sulked. “Now he’s going to hate me more.”

I hooked an arm around her neck and led her off the dance floor. “You know the great thing about family?” I mused. “They weren’t your choice, so you’re not responsible. The great thing about friends is that you can choose them.”

And I slid my foot around the leg of a wooden chair at Madoc’s table and yanked it out, guiding Pasha down into it.

“Guys, you remember Pasha, right?” I jerked my chin to my friends, the flush of heat on the right side of my face not going unnoticed as I felt Tate’s eyes on me.

“Hey,” murmurs sounded around the table.

I stood, holding the back of my assistant’s chair, as Fallon stood up and grabbed a bottle of beer out of their bucket. She plucked off the cap and set it in front of Pasha.

I gave Fallon a nod of thanks, knowing that my friends were the best thing I could give Pasha right now.

My eyes drifted to Tate, and even though her gaze was defiantly trained on an empty space across the table, I knew I was the only thing she was aware of.

Her loose waves were draped over one shoulder, blanketing her breast, and she sat still and quiet, as if she were expecting me to do or say something.

I dropped my eyes to Ben’s hand rubbing the inside of her thigh, and then noticed that she, too, had her hand on his leg.

Steeling my jaw, I turned around to make my way back across the dance floor when Madoc called out. “Dude, just sit here,” he prompted. “Come on.”

I laughed at all the eyes on me. “I don’t think so,” I said, and then added, “Tate’s uncomfortable.”

Her narrowed eyes instantly pinned me. “We share the same friends, Jared. I can handle it.”

I cocked my head, amusement warming my skin. “Really?” I challenged. “Your breathing is shallow. Your fists are clenched. You’ll hardly look at me,” I assessed, raking my eyes down her body. “And you didn’t have your hand on him”—I arched a brow at Ben—“until I walked over here.”

I smirked, reveling in the silence that greeted me. “You’re right,” I taunted. “You’re not uncomfortable. You’re nervous.”

I knew I was right. I knew that if I felt her cheeks, they’d be warm, and if I put my hand over her heart, it would be racing.

But as much as I was satisfied that I’d nailed her mood, I couldn’t help but

wonder why she wasn't bounding out of the chair and hitting me.

Not that Tate was exceedingly violent, but she'd at least be shouting at me.

Instead, the corner of her full pink lips curled into a sinister grin as she stood up and held me entranced with her stormy eyes.

She arched a brow, looking amused. "Nervous?" she repeated. "I'm actually entertained that you think you occupy more than a bare minimum of my memory, Jared. That's how easily forgettable you were." She inched closer to me, stalking nearer with her calm, even steps. "And I'm actually quite entertained when I look back and think about how much I deluded myself about you."

Her condescending tone made me grit my teeth. A fucking memory?
I was *all* of her memories.

"The only way you can win an argument is by throwing a fist," she taunted. "Your antisocial behavior bored me out of my mind, and your lack of conversational skills in public was embarrassing, to say the least."

What the fuck?

My hot gaze zeroed in on her, and I slowly lifted my chin as anger swarmed through my chest.

I closed the distance with a last step and looked down at her, inhaling her soft scent. I bared my teeth, letting my buried temper seep out. "You liked my conversational skills when we were alone well enough," I pointed out, continuing as I enunciated every word. "In the car, on top of the car, in my shower, in your bed"—I got in her face, growling—"on nearly every floor in nearly every room of your house, you loved my conversational skills then."

I registered a snort behind Tate, and her furious wide eyes turned on Juliet.

Her friend looked up, her face falling at Tate's glare. Madoc's and Jax's eyes were focused on the ground, as they wisely bit back their amusement.

Ben appeared at Tate's side, taking her hand and not sparing me a glance. "Let's go," he said firmly.

Tate looked at me with fury warming her face and nodded. "Absolutely."

But as she let Ben lead her away, she stopped and leaned in, whispering for only me to hear. "You were good for some things," she remarked. "Just not for others."

My lungs emptied as I watched them leave together, and all the while the stares of everyone at the table burned a hole into the back of my head.

Fuck me.

She called to every nerve ending on my body, and I wanted nothing more

than to have her underneath me. Despite the fact that she'd just insinuated I was good for only one thing.

I smiled.

The next time her claws came out, she would be reminded of every damn thing that I was good for.

Chapter 7

Tate

“You know, it’s okay if having him around unnerves you,” Ben said softly, holding my hand as we walked up the brick path to my house. “You were together for a long time.”

I offered a tight smile, squeezing his hand. “Jared doesn’t unnerve me,” I maintained. “He aggravates me.”

We climbed the wide wooden stairs into the soft glow of the porch light, and I flicked my gaze quickly to Jax’s house, noticing that all the lights were still out.

I’d opted to come home, since I’d guessed Jared would probably be staying at Madoc’s.

Whenever he got home, that is. He’d had Pasha and a date with him, after all.

I stopped halfway up the stairs, turning to look down at Ben, who was one step below. “I’d invite you in,” I started, lightly tugging on the front of his polo, “but it’s really a mess.”

A flash of disappointment crossed his face, but he offered a quick smile, hiding it well.

The mess shouldn’t matter, of course. And it didn’t matter. My room was clean, after all.

The truth was I was too distracted to invite Ben in. He deserved my complete attention, and right now, my body and head were too restless. Too roused. I couldn’t take him home tonight.

He held my gaze, studying my face with an air of calmness. I knew he knew the real reason behind my excuse, but he didn’t say anything. He nodded, accepting what I couldn’t put into words.

Ben was a good guy. And a smart one. He told me I was pretty, and he supported my choices. Looking into his blue eyes, I almost wanted to get lost. To find out what it would feel like to have his warm skin against mine. To see if he

could make me feel as good as . . .

I cleared my throat, pushing the idea out of my head.

I'd be using Ben to make myself feel better—to feel anything—and we both deserved more. So that's why we needed to wait for a better time.

He stepped up, lowering his lips to mine for a chaste kiss. He tasted like cinnamon this time, and I slowly breathed in his cologne. Backing down, he smiled gently before turning away to leave.

But I stopped him.

I grabbed his upper arm and pulled him back in, dipping my head and diving into his lips as his body jerked in surprise. I teased his tongue with my own and cocked my head to the side, going deeper and enjoying his hitched breath. Ben's hand circled the back of my neck, and my cheeks warmed with his closeness.

This was how it was. Enjoyable. Comfortable. He was a good kisser.

But nothing happened unless I pressed it. When he actually tried to get to second base, he'd asked me if it was okay. I felt bad for feeling disappointed. He was only being polite, after all. But it was like he didn't know what he wanted and was perfectly happy following my direction. He'd wait for my say-so, and I wasn't sure if that would ever turn me on.

It's not that I wanted to be controlled. I just wanted to be carried away.

He backed up, smiling a little bigger before finally turning to go to his car.

Unlocking my front door, I stepped into my house, immediately hearing little claws *tap, tap, tap* on the hardwood floors.

I glanced up, smiling as Madman raced down the hall from the kitchen and shot up, supporting himself against my shins. He must've escaped the confines of Jax's backyard and found his way through our doggy door. Jax and Juliet had been watching him while I was staying at Madoc's. I could've taken him with me, but I had been so busy this week, he got more attention with Jax and Juliet.

He was just a little guy—a stray dog—Jared and I had found ten years ago, and although he'd lived with Jared for most of that time, I was happy he'd been mine the past couple of years.

The little dude never failed to make me laugh. Even now, as old as he was getting, his energy hadn't wavered.

I reached down, petting the top of his head and knowing exactly what the little hellion wanted. Food, water, and a belly rub—all at the same time.

I made my way to the kitchen, walking past the mess the painters had made in the dining room this week. White sheets draped over furniture and on the

hardwood floors, and I inhaled the familiar scent of paint.

Of new beginnings and a fresh start.

I refreshed Madman's food and water in the kitchen and took in deep breaths, closing my eyes as I walked back through the foyer, savoring the old memories.

Mom painted rooms a lot when I was growing up. She liked change, so the smell of the chemicals actually comforted me. It was home.

And I hated that I was losing it. My father had turned down two good offers, and while I wasn't sure why, I didn't complain.

I understood that selling the house was for the best. Although I would miss being close to my friends, and I couldn't even think about anyone else living here, I knew I needed to get away from Jared. Away from the memories, away from his old room sitting across from mine, away from a future full of him showing up back in town without warning whenever he felt like it.

So yes, change was necessary no matter how uncomfortable.

When I was little, I cried when my mom had made me donate some of my toys before Christmas one year. She'd said I needed to make room for the new things Santa was bringing me, and even though I didn't play with the old stuff, I almost felt like the toys were people. Who would they go to? Would they be taken care of and loved?

But my mom said that everything is hard the first time. The more you embrace change, though, the easier it gets. Which is why she repainted rooms every couple of years.

Change prepared us for loss, and she was right. It did get easier.

I had to embrace the possibility of a relationship with Ben or whoever else came along, and Jared could do whatever he liked. That's the way things needed to be.

And no matter how uncomfortable it was to be around him, I knew Jared was most likely home to see his mother and be present for the birth of his sister. I didn't want to ruin the visit for him.

I picked my phone out of my pocket and walked into my bathroom while typing out a text with shaky fingers.

I swallowed and sent the text to Jared.

Leave me alone, and I'll do the same.

I squeezed the phone for about two seconds before setting it down on the

sink and stripping off my clothes.

And to make damn sure I didn't dwell on him or whether he would respond or what he would say when he did, I brushed out my hair, slipped on my thin white pajama shorts and fitted black Seether hoodie, and got into bed.

Turning off the light, I plugged my phone into the charger and curled under the covers. I wasn't going to wait for him to respond. I wasn't going to wait for him to react.

I wasn't going to wait for him.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, finally noticing a text on my phone from Jared.

I can't, the text read. And neither can you.

Glancing at the time on the phone, I saw that it was after two in the morning. I'd been asleep for only an hour.

I'd assumed it was my dad texting, since he often forgot about the time difference and texted at weird hours. But remembering my text to Jared, telling him to leave me alone, I studied his response again. Was he insinuating I couldn't control myself?

"Arrogant jerk," I spat out, my mad fingers typing out my only response.

I whispered to myself as I texted. Don't talk to me. Don't come near me.

I slammed the phone back down on the bedside table and ground my face into the pillow, determined to keep him out of my mind.

It didn't work.

I punched the bed. *What an ass!*

"Pompous, over-confident, son of a . . ." I growled into my pillow, hating that there might be a slice of truth to his words.

I remembered very well how much I loved it when he *didn't* leave me alone. Jared's favorite place was anywhere he could get me naked.

My phone buzzed and lit up again, and I blinked, knowing I just needed to ignore him.

But I lifted my head anyway, still scowling as I read the text floating across the top of the screen.

I won't come near you. Yet. I'd rather watch you.

My breath caught. "What?" I whispered to myself, scrunching my eyebrows

together.

Watch me? I swallowed and tried to compose myself, not sure if I was reading that correctly. Picking up the phone, I threw off the covers and tiptoed to the end of the bed, where I peeked out my French doors and through the tree of dense foliage.

Where are you? I texted, not seeing a light coming from his old room. How could he watch me unless he could see me? All of a sudden I straightened, a stream of light slipping through my sheer curtains from a lamp in his old room, now illuminated.

I tucked my hair behind my ear as a nervous heat flared up in my chest. I pushed up my sleeves and crossed my arms over my chest, my heart fluttering with quick beats.

Jared appeared at the window, and I backed away, blanketing myself in darkness. “Shit,” I whispered, as if I thought he could hear me. *Why is he home and not at Madoc’s?*

At least since he was the one with the lights on, I could see him, but he couldn’t see me.

He still wore his black pants from before, but his belt and T-shirt were now off, and he just stood there, looking like he knew exactly where I was. Even from here, I could see his playful eyes, and I knew, without a doubt, that if I opened my doors, he would come over. Just like old times.

Knowing that sent a shiver up my arms.

He brought up his phone level with his waist, texting, and I let my eyes linger on his body—the abs, tight and narrow that I’d traced with my tongue more than once.

I growled low, averting my eyes.

My phone vibrated, and I slid the screen to look at the message.

You were beyond beautiful at the track tonight.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to harden myself against his soft side. He rarely showed it, which gave it more of an impact, and I didn’t want him saying nice things to me.

Even after all this time, you still kill me. I still want you, Tate.

“Don’t,” I whispered to no one, and then, sighing, I lowered myself to the end of the bed, still seeing his dark form out of the corner of my eye.

I missed the way your body used to move with mine, he texted again. I dropped my head forward, reading the texts as they came in.

But I never forgot it.

I remember every inch of your skin. Every taste, every sound you’d make . . .

The moonlight fell on my lap, and I could see my fingers turning white as I squeezed the phone.

He did know every inch of me, and he could play me like an instrument. His demanding hands and mouth were so greedy, and I dropped my head back, feeling a trickle of sweat glide down my spine.

Shit.

My fingers tingled, and I knew what he was trying to do, and I didn’t want him to stop.

Seems you’re the one with poor conversational skills tonight, he texted.

I rolled my eyes.

You may think you’re different, but you’re not. I know you still feel me, he wrote, and I gritted my teeth at his arrogance, even as I clenched my thighs at his memory.

So many times I was inside of you, he taunted. Tell me you remember, or I’ll have to remind you.

I closed my eyes, my pulse pumping through my body like a drum.

Jared.

I ran my hand down my thigh, fucking loving the rush between my legs. It had been so long.

“Damn him,” I gasped under my breath.

Do you want me to stop? he asked.

I took in short, fast breaths as I stared at the screen.

Do it. Tell him to stop, I told myself. This is fucked-up, and he can’t have you.

But my skin was on fire. And it felt like home.

Like warmth and peace and no matter what changed in my life, the people I

met, the things I lost, or where I lived, if I was in his orbit, then I was home.

Even when I was eleven and it had been one year to the day that my mother had died, Jared was my beacon that day. He didn't leave my side, even when I ignored him. He just pushed me on our old tire swing in the backyard for two hours until I finally stopped crying and started talking. He was my friend. We had a strong foundation.

And then, as he became a man, the feelings became stronger. So much stronger.

I sat there and ground my ass in a small circle, giving myself the pleasure of the friction from my shorts and thong against my skin.

He texted again, and I gave in, reading his words.

I loved the skin on the curve of your thigh, Tate. The part where your leg met your hip. It was heaven, and even now, I can still taste it.

My eyes fluttered, and I let my body fall back onto the bed as I grazed the part of my thigh that he loved.

You used to grip my hair so hard that you were damn near riding my face. Your dad never knew how bad you really were.

I ran the heel of my palm over my clit through my pajama shorts and moaned, thinking about his covert morning visits before school. He'd sneak in, bury his head between my legs, and go so hard he'd have to put a hand over my mouth so we weren't overheard.

Sophomore year when you started track . . . your legs got so toned. I thought you were trying to drive me crazy on purpose.

I slid my middle finger between my folds over my thin shorts, and I couldn't help it.

I craved his rough hands on me again.

I tensed every muscle in my chest, bringing my breasts higher, and I imagined his long fingers sliding under my hoodie, because he could never keep his damn hands off my chest.

You always fit so perfectly, Tate. The way you'd arch your hips back into me when I fucked you from behind.

"Fuck," I groaned at the memory, rolling my hips into my hand and closing my eyes.

That was your favorite position, wasn't it?

I didn't answer, because he already knew. Ever since the kitchen table, I always loved it when he had me on my hands and knees.

You never melted underneath me, either, he continued. Every time I pushed, you pushed back. I'd thrust my cock inside of you, and you'd push your fucking back up off the bed, rubbing your nipples against my lips and begging for my tongue. You always liked it hard.

The ache at my entrance was so hot and sweet. I needed him so bad. No one drove me wild like he did. The rush of need flooded me, and I felt the wetness through my shorts as I rubbed the nub harder.

I closed my eyes, imagining him flipping me onto my stomach and sliding into me. Sweat covered my brow as I remembered, just like it was yesterday, that fucking fantastic pain I always felt when he entered me. It was a small hurt, but I loved it. He'd hit so deep inside, and the stretch and pressure were sweet.

I brought up the phone to see his new message.

Do you remember graduation night? In my car, out by the lake? It was so hot. Your dress was torn and on the floor of the car, and you put on my necktie. It was the only thing you were wearing.

I remembered. I'd straddled him in the backseat with his tie lying between my breasts. He couldn't take it. He'd attacked like a wild dog, nearly eating me alive.

Tate, you don't know what you do to me. You drive me out of my mind. Your words, your laughter, your tears, your eyes . . . everything about you owns me.

"Me, too," I whispered, a tear spilling out of the corner of my eye and dripping down my temple.

I swallowed, rubbing my legs together to get rid of the ache.

I'm a better man, but there's never been a better woman for me. There's never been anyone like you, he texted.

I fisted my hands, needing to come. I gasped, wanting him to make me come, but I crashed my fist to the bed, refusing to give him the satisfaction.

He'd hurt me too much, and no matter the physical attraction that still existed between us, that hadn't changed. I needed to remember that.

I want to crush his fucking hands when he touches you.

But honestly . . . , he continued, it's a hell of a turn-on watching another man have what I want.

Yeah, just like me seeing him with another woman. I hated it, and it hurt, but it made me feel possessive, too. It made me want to fight.

In fact, I'm steel-rod straight right now.

My lungs emptied, and I dragged my bottom lip through my teeth, almost smiling, but I stopped myself. Jared—hard and ready—was a sight that never failed to make my mouth water. I pictured him holding himself right now, even though I was lying down and I couldn't see him.

It was another minute before he texted again.

You look hot. You should take off that sweatshirt before you go to bed.

My eyes rounded, and I shot off the bed, gapping out my French doors. He didn't see me, did he? It was dark in here. Light over there. I ran my hand through my hair, shame heating my face.

Peeking to get my line of sight out the doors, I saw Jared still standing in the golden glow of the lamp that he'd turned on before. Even through the tree and the darkness, I could see the self-satisfied look in his eyes before he looked down and texted once more.

I remember everything, Tate, he texted. And I know you do, too.

I let phone drop to the bed, seeing the amusement in his eyes turn to a dark threat as he pulled the drapes closed and disappeared.

Fuck.

Chapter 8

Tate

I pounded along the sidewalk, sneakers cushioning the impact as I leaped over the curb and across the street. Three Days Grace's "I Hate Everything About You" blared through my earbuds, and I was covered in sweat from my stomach up to my head.

I was in good shape, and I normally didn't push for speed on my runs, but the fact that I was gulping in air let me know that I'd gone too far and hard. I never got out of breath on my regular morning jogs.

Slowing to a walk as I stepped onto the sidewalk on my side of the street, I pulled up the hem of my black tank top and wiped off my face.

My cropped black stretch pants were damp with my sweat, and the fabric itched my thighs.

They were pissing me off.

My ponytail dragging across my back was pissing me off. My aching feet, and the fact that I hadn't managed to run my unwanted energy out of my body, both pissed me off.

I hadn't been this pissed off in a long time.

I'd woken to the sound of Jared's motorcycle piercing through my sleep like a flood of hot water over my skin, and I lay in bed, flattened to the mattress, suddenly desperate for one of his morning visits. I'd always been in the mood more in the mornings, and having his naked body nestled between my legs, begging for entry, used to be a damn nice way to wake up.

But he'd sped off, and I certainly didn't want what my body might have craved.

I walked into my house, set my keys, along with my iPod and earbuds, on the entryway table, and walked into the kitchen, Madman trailing behind me. Firing up my laptop on the table, I proceeded with making an omelet while I downed two bottles of water and chopped some fruit.

It had been hard to try to eat healthy with the schedule I kept. The hospital

always had boxes of Krispy Kremes, cookies, and other treats floating around, and since I was either reading at the library, reading at home, or working on my car when I wasn't working or at school, I had a hard time not grabbing what was convenient in a rush. Thankfully, my weekends were free, so I food prepped by premaking salads and healthy snacks.

Although I did still snatch up a chocolate-glazed doughnut any chance I got.

Sitting down at the table, I dialed my father for our once-a-week video chat.

"Hey, Dad," I greeted him, cutting into a piece of my omelet with spinach, mushrooms, and cheese. "How's beautiful Italy? Staying away from all of the wine, right?" I teased, stuffing the loaded fork into my mouth.

"Actually, wine is good for the heart," he pointed out with laughter in his blue eyes. My eyes.

"Yeah, one glass," I clarified. "Not five, okay?"

He nodded. "Touché."

My dad wasn't big on alcohol, but I knew he'd taken a particular liking to the food in certain countries where he'd been assigned over the years. Italy being one of them.

But a few years ago his lifestyle finally took a toll on his body. He had a hectic schedule, little consistency in his routine, poor eating habits because he was always on the go, and little to no exercise due to the travel. He had two heart attacks while abroad and didn't even tell me. I had been livid when I found out.

Now I stayed in better contact to nag him more. I'd dipped into my savings and sent him a treadmill for Christmas one year, and I even scoped out the grocery stores in whatever area he lived in, so I could push him to their salad bars and organic selections.

Thankfully, he put up with it. He'd been my only parent for about twelve years now, and he finally got a clue and realized I needed him around for a long time to come.

"Are you at the house?" he asked, looking around me. "I thought you were staying with Madoc and Fallon."

I shrugged, concentrating on my food. "It's the weekend. The workers aren't here, and I wanted to get some yard work in. Making it presentable, you know?"

The yards were actually in great shape. Jax had been taking care of everything while my father was away and I was at school. I'd really just wanted to be home, and I knew, no matter how I tried to hide it, my father could read me

well.

“Tate, I know this is hard,” he said softly. “Selling the house, I mean. I know you’re going to miss it there.”

I swallowed the lump of food in my throat, making sure I looked indifferent. “It’ll be a hard good-bye, but nothing can stay the same forever, right?” I was trying to stay positive. There was nothing that could be done, and I couldn’t expect my father to keep paying expenses on a large house we no longer needed.

“Honey, look at me, please.”

I stopped cutting food with my fork and looked up.

He stared at me for a moment, but then frowned and looked away. Brushing his nose with his hand, he let out a sigh.

My heart sank, and I wondered what the hell he was trying to say.

“Is everything okay?” I shot out. “Your heart—?”

“I’m fine.” He nodded quickly. “I just . . .”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is it the house? Has it been sold?”

His gaze locked on mine, and he hesitated before replying. “No.” He shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong necessarily.”

“Dad, just spit it out.”

He ran a hand through his hair and exhaled a hard breath. “Well, I’m seeing someone, actually,” he said. “Someone I’ve grown very close to.”

I set my fork down, my back straightening. Seeing someone? I remembered him talking about going on a date here and there a while after my mom died, but he never introduced me to anyone. Was it serious?

My dad watched me, waiting for me to say something, probably.

I finally blinked, clearing my throat. “Dad, that’s great,” I told him with an honest smile. “I’m happy for you. Is she Italian?”

“No.” He fidgeted, looking very uncomfortable. “No, she lives back home, actually.”

“Here?”

His cheeks puffed out as he ran his hand through his hair once more. “This is very awkward.” He laughed nervously. “Honey, about a year ago, I started seeing one of . . .” He trailed off, looking like he desperately needed different words to tell me what he needed to tell me. “I started seeing one of your old teachers. Elizabeth Penley,” he rushed out.

“Miss Penley?”

Miss Penley and my dad?

“It was sporadic,” he explained, sounding more like he was apologizing. “With my schedule and her job and your schedule, not to mention that when you did make it home here and there, I wanted our time together to be just us.” He took a deep breath and continued, “It just seemed like there was never a good time to tell you.”

I guess I understood.

He probably could’ve mentioned it at some point, though. *Jesus.*

“I didn’t know if it would last, and I didn’t want to mention it until I was sure. It’s only gotten really serious in the past couple of months,” he explained further, as if reading my mind.

Nodding, I tried to absorb the idea of my dad telling me about someone new in his life. He’d never made this big a deal out of anyone.

But the truth was, I had been worried about him. I always worried about him. Especially with me no longer home during his time at home, I couldn’t shake the guilt that he was eating alone, watching TV alone, going to sleep alone . . .

Although my mom would always be loved and important, I didn’t want my dad by himself forever.

“Well.” I sighed. “It’s about time. And I love Miss Penley. She’s amazing.” But then I narrowed my eyes on him, questioning. “But why, if you couldn’t find the time to tell me at Christmas or spring break or over video chat before, are you telling me now?”

He offered a timid smile. “Because I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

“Tate!”

I jerked my head to the left, seeing Madoc heading my way.

“Great,” I whispered, focusing back out on the track.

After the call with my dad, I came out—as so many others did during the day—to take a few practice runs around the track and enjoy the calm I found here without the crowd.

I was struggling, and I didn’t know why. I liked Penley, and I wanted my dad to have someone. His proposing was a good thing, and I should’ve been happy for him.

So why did I feel like it was all suddenly too much?

The house, Stanford, his relationship . . . I felt as if I were at sail without a

rudder or an anchor.

So I came out to drive. To clear my head.

To be alone, which Madoc hated.

“Let’s go.” The bite in his voice was sharp, and I knew he wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Now.”

I looked at him again, confusion, aggravation, and frustration probably all evident on my face. “Where?”

He jerked his head behind him. “My house. We threw a party together. Fallon said she texted you an hour ago.”

“No.” I shook my head, knowing exactly whom I’d see there. “No party.”

He halted, pushing his suit jacket open and planting his hands on his hips.

“What are you wearing?” I asked, taking in the black suit pants and jacket and the light blue shirt with the royal blue tie. His clothes and hair were sleek and stylish, and I could never get over how he wound up with someone as alternative as Fallon.

He straightened, suddenly looking affronted. Running a hand down his front, he tipped his chin down at me. “Hot or not?” he asked, turning playful as he referred to his clothes. “I had to go in for my internship for a few hours this morning.”

I turned my eyes back out to the track, deciding not to encourage him.

“Let’s go.” His strong voice nagged again, getting back on topic.

I heaved out a sigh and hopped off the hood. “Knock it off. I don’t need you interfering.”

I went to open my door, but Madoc flattened his palm against the window, stopping me.

“You’re going to run into him a lot in your life,” he pressed. “Reunions, friends’ weddings, and what about when Fallon and I have kids? Or Jax and Juliet?”

My heart pumped wildly as I realized Madoc was right. I’d be running into Jared a lot over the years.

Shit.

Madoc grabbed my shoulders, forcing me to face him. “Get this through your head, okay?” He spoke to me like my father. “You are as important to us as he is. You’re not pulling away again. We’re not letting you go.”

Like a petulant child, I shot my eyes up at him. I hated his persistence.

Although I kind of liked it, too.

He never let me go. Juliet and Fallon were going to be with these guys

forever and have children with them. And they'd no doubt settle here.

And they were all my friends as much as Jared's.

I dug my keys out of my pocket. "Fine, but I'll drive my own car."

"Hey," Fallon greeted me, pulling me in for a kiss on the cheek. Unusually chipper, so I guessed she was probably tipsy, although she seemed otherwise alert.

She wore one of her old gray T-shirts—cut, ripped, and tied—turned into a sexy, nearly backless tank top. Her cutoff jean shorts were already making Madoc drool as he came up behind her, groping her ass and burying his face in her neck.

"Get a drink," she ordered, smiling as Madoc wrapped a possessive arm around her waist. And then she pinned me with her laser green stare. "And relax, okay?"

I spotted Ben outside by the pool, so I left my friends to it and trailed out to meet him.

Madoc and Fallon liked having people around, and Madoc especially loved his parties. It wasn't because he wanted to drink or act out. It was because he loved community. He loved his friends, and he liked good times and good conversation. I had absolutely no doubt that Madoc would end up mayor of Shelburne Falls one day, because that's how much he loved his family. And this town was his family.

And the idea of Fallon in a blue—or red—tailored dress with an American flag pinned to her was pretty funny, bless her heart.

I stepped through the sliding glass doors, hearing "She's Crafty" by the Beastie Boys fill the late afternoon air, and it made me smile finally. It wasn't as crowded as many of Madoc's parties, but there were a good thirty people out here. Most of them dressed in swim shorts and bikinis, while I still wore my jeans and shirt from the Loop.

Walking up to Ben, I put my hand on his bare back, but before he even had a chance to turn around, I felt that familiar awareness that always made the hair on my arms stand up when Jared was around.

Ben turned and flashed me a wide smile, but as he leaned in to kiss my cheek, I glanced over his shoulder, unable to not look.

But Jared wasn't here. I flitted my eyes around, scanning the party, but I

didn't see him anywhere.

It was some weird sixth sense I had, and although it couldn't be explained, I always knew when he was close. Could've been the way my neck heated up or my skin vibrated under the surface, or maybe it was just because I expected him to be there, but as soon as I felt him, that's all I was aware of.

Couples caroused and swimmers splashed around, but as I continued to look around, I didn't find him.

He had to be here, though. His assistant, Pasha, was pouring a beer from the keg. I had spotted her purple hair.

"Are you okay?" Ben pulled back, one hand holding my waist and the other holding a plate of food.

"Yeah," I rasped, reeling myself back in. "I'm good. I just . . ." I sucked in a slow breath, trying to shake off my nerves as I pointed my thumb behind me. "I'm just going to run down to the storage and get Madoc some more bottles that he asked for, okay? I'll be right back."

Giving Ben a quick peck on the cheek, I turned around and speed walked for the house before he saw the lie in my eyes.

Of course, Madoc hadn't asked for more liquor from his dad's storage, but I needed a minute away. Veering around the few people in the kitchen and the island of food, I swung the basement door open and jogged down the stairs.

The basement was empty, as early in the party everyone usually socialized together before the women allowed their boyfriends—and husbands—to disappear down to Madoc's game room. The pool table, the skate ramp, and the leather couches all sat unused as I steered myself down the hallway and into the finished bathroom across from the storage room.

"God, baby," a man's rough whisper caught my ears just as I was escaping into the bathroom. "I can't keep my hands off you. Why do you do this to me, huh?"

His muffled voice was accompanied by shuffles and loud breathing.

There was giggling, followed by a girl's voice saying, "I don't do anything, Mr. Trent. Promise."

My eyes flared, and my stomach knotted. *Mr. Trent.*

I heard fabric rip, and the woman sucked in a breath.

Clenching my jaw, I dropped my hand from the door handle and inched toward the storage room door, which was ajar.

"Spread your legs for me," he ordered, sounding strained.

I stopped and listened, afraid to hear but afraid not to.

“Come on,” he urged, his voice getting firmer. “Wider. Show me how much you want it.”

Oh, my God.

That wasn't Jared. It couldn't be. But the voice was raspy, and I couldn't tell for sure.

What the hell?

I put my hand on the door to steady myself.

“Does that hurt?” He sounded amused.

“Yes,” she gasped. “I'm spread so wide for you, baby.”

“Do you love it?” he taunted, and I heard a zipper.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Oh, God. Please. Fuck me!” Her cry carried into the hall, and my heart was racing.

Was that Juliet's voice?

“I love you,” he said, and then let out a low growl as she sucked in a breath.

“Oh, Jax!” the girl cried out, and I immediately let out a long breath.

Jax. *Oh, thank God.*

Not Jared. Just Jared's brother. Also a Mr. Trent. Okay. I felt better now.

Although why was Juliet calling her boyfriend “Mr. Trent”?

I shook my head, laughing to myself. *Kinky kids.*

I turned around, taking a step, but I immediately halted. Jared stood right behind me with his arms folded over his chest. He leaned against the opposite wall and seemed completely oblivious to Jax and Juliet. His eyes were on me only.

A rush of hot anger tensed my limbs, and I steeled myself for whatever he had coming.

“How long's it been?” He jerked his chin, referring to what was happening in the storage room. “How long since you lost control like that?”

It was a rhetorical question. Maybe he actually wanted an answer, but I'd never give him one. I stood there, letting him see me strong and calm. His gaze stayed locked with mine before falling slowly down my body, and I suddenly felt very naked.

I was dressed more than most of the people here, but my faded and ripped jeans were skintight, and my flowing black tank top was nearly backless, held only by the fragile spaghetti straps. And since the top flattered my form more without a bra, I wasn't wearing one.

I felt my nipples harden against the fabric, and I knew the moment he noticed it, too.

Jared's eyes heated with hunger, and his biceps stretched the short sleeves of his black T-shirt.

You may never know what Jared was thinking, but you almost always knew what he was feeling. He was as subtle as a bomb when he was turned on.

Desire flared between my legs, and the heat spread like a ripple in a lake through my body. Jared and I had never failed in the bedroom, and it'd been so long since I'd felt as good as he made me feel.

"How about last night?" he continued, taunting. "I think you lost control then."

Ignoring my plans to escape to the bathroom—since I'd only been trying to have a quiet place to rid my head of thoughts of him and now he was here—I walked past him back down the hallway to make my way out the basement door. I wasn't talking to him.

But then I gasped as he caught me from behind and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"What are you doing?" I bit out.

His arms were like a steel band, crushing my body into his. I breathed hard, nearly stumbling with his weight falling into me.

Shit.

"Tate," he whispered in my ear, desperate. "Would it have been better if I had never left? Would you still love me if I kept living a lie?"

I turned my head away, folding my lips between my teeth.

I never wanted him miserable. Why was he trying to break my heart all over again? I'd just wanted him to stay.

I didn't understand why he needed to leave me to feel whole.

Pinpricks tingled my skin, and his breath on my neck felt like it was flowing through my blood. Having him close felt so good.

I closed my eyes, taking in a breath of air. I needed to tell him to get his hands off me, but I couldn't see straight.

But before I knew what was happening, he spun me around and lifted me up, setting me onto the pool table. He wrapped an arm around my thigh, and I whimpered as he jerked me to the end of the table. I started to fall back, but before I could right myself, he leaned down, dipping his lips to the skin of my stomach.

"Ah," I moaned, shocked at what he was doing. My chest rose and fell fast as his lips and tongue, not to mention his teeth, worked my body and left a trail of sensation below my rib cage.

I fell back onto the table, unable to stop, simply trying to keep my eyes from rolling into the back of my head.

Jared.

Oh, my God. His mouth. And his teeth, tugging at my skin as if no time had passed.

I grabbed the back of his neck, arching my body into him. “Jared, get off me,” I groaned, my eyelids fluttering closed. “Please.”

But then he sank his teeth into the sensitive skin on my side, and I squeezed my eyes shut, the pleasure racing inside me almost too much.

“Jared, stop!” I yelled, urging him off me even as I clutched his neck, holding him to me.

His lips left my skin, and when I opened my eyes, his nearly black stare, dark with desire, had zoned in on my exposed breast.

Oh, shit.

In the struggle, my shirt was a mess. The spaghetti strap on one shoulder had fallen down my arm, and so had the part of the shirt covering my breast.

Jared looked up at me, raising himself higher as I shook my head.

“No,” I warned, knowing what he was going to do.

But he let out a low breath and sank his lips onto my skin anyway, covering my entire nipple with his mouth.

I groaned, feeling warm all over.

He swirled his tongue around my hardening flesh, catching my nipple between his teeth and drawing it out, playing with it. He went slow, diving back down to suck almost painfully hard, but I loved it.

“I said I would be back for you. You know there’s only me, Tate,” he pushed. “No one else can give you this.”

My fist squeezed at the back of his hair, and the pool of lust in my gut instantly cemented, turning hard and cold.

I stroked his cheek with my thumb, looking down at his handsome face. “I know you loved me. I never wanted you unhappy.” I spoke through my shaky breath. “But I don’t trust you. You always desert me.”

I pushed him away and jumped off the table, righting my clothes before I had any second thoughts about giving in.

Without looking back, I jetted up the staircase and back out to the pool, suddenly feeling the urge to go home.

Ben was standing with Madoc and Fallon—Madoc now in swim shorts—and they were all laughing as I came up to stand next to Fallon.

“Did you get the bottles?” Ben asked. “You were gone awhile.”

I blinked, remembering the bottles I’d told him I was getting.

Catching Madoc’s confused sideways glance at me, I just shook my head. “Couldn’t find what I was looking for. No biggie. So”—I looked to Madoc, changing the subject—“how’s the internship going?”

Madoc stuffed a chip in his mouth. “Good.” He nodded. “I kind of hate the stuck-up pricks in my father’s office, and the men are even worse, but I’ll get through it.”

Ben laughed, and I watched Madoc grab another handful of chips out of the bowl.

“Here,” Fallon said, grabbing the bowl and shoving it into Madoc’s chest. “You know you’re going to eat all of them.”

He shrugged and kept eating.

Fallon laughed. “You would think he was pregnant.” She smiled lovingly at her husband. “He ate the sushi you brought home yesterday, and the leftovers in the fridge, and then he ordered burgers from the Mining Company. He eats constantly.”

I let out a sigh, looking to Ben to gauge his reaction.

“Sushi?” he asked. “The sushi I brought you at work yesterday?”

“Tate hates sushi.” A voice came from behind us, and Jared walked up to the cooler, grabbing a long neck.

Ben’s eyes narrowed at Jared, clearly aggravated that he was here, but I intervened to ease Ben’s mind before anything started.

“Don’t worry about it,” I spoke to Ben. “I thought I mentioned it, but I guess not.”

Jared twisted off his cap, tossing it in the trash as he turned to look at me. He didn’t break eye contact as he tipped up the bottle and took a drink.

I knew that look. The one that said he was two seconds from hitting Ben or kissing me. And both would cause a fight.

I looked to Ben, ready to get out of here. “Any interest in cutting out of here early?” I asked. “Go back to my place?”

Ben looked relieved. I hated that my issues were keeping us from having a good time, but at least some space from Jared would mean we could just relax.

Ben nodded and took my hand, leading me off.

“Everywhere you kiss her,” Jared belted out to us from behind—and I noticed bystanders turning to look—“just remember that my tongue was there first.”

I stopped and turned around, glaring at Jared. It wasn't so bad that people were looking, that a few girls were laughing behind their hands, or that Madoc sucked at hiding his snort.

No, what really pissed me off was being embarrassed in front of Ben. Of Jared talking about me like I was his personal property and trying to deny me a shot at a relationship with someone else.

Just like in high school.

"Does she still like it in the morning?" he taunted. "That's when she has the most energy."

I lost my composure, mortified at what he was doing. *What the hell?*

The bystanders oohed and giggled. Jared's smirk was vile, and I arched an eyebrow, feeling Ben tense next to me as Jared tried to educate him. Telling him all the ways he knew me.

I squeezed my fists and walked up to Jared slowly.

I let my smile show through my eyes as I whispered. "He knows when I like it, Jared."

It was a lie, but Jared didn't know that. His smirk slowly fell, and the rage in his eyes was evident, even though his face appeared calm.

I turned around just in time to see Ben lunge for Jared, and I gasped as Jared reared back and Madoc jumped in to pull Ben away. "You son of a—" Ben was cut off as Madoc spun him around and walked him off, away from the crowd.

Jared pulled me into his arms, Ben forgotten, and wrapped them around my waist. "You want to play?" he charged, biting out every word so only I could hear.

"Challenge accepted, Tatum. This time I don't want you hurt," he continued, his breath falling over me as he got in my face, "and I don't want you small. I just want you. Do you hear me?" He jerked me into his body. "It will be my ring on your finger and my kids in your belly someday."

I twisted, struggling to free myself as rage kicked in, heating up my face and neck.

He bared his teeth. "Tatum Brandt is my fucking food," he growled. "They all knew it in high school, and not a damn thing has changed."

I yanked my body out of his hold and backed away, moving across the patio as he held my eyes. My hands ached to hit him, and I fisted my fingers and steeled my arms, glaring at him.

And he smiled.

“There’s my wildcat,” he commented, clearly seeing the anger that I couldn’t contain. “You want to hit me, don’t you? You want to fight and scream and challenge me back, and you know why?”

I ground my teeth together, thinking about how good it would feel to wipe that smirk off his face.

“Because you care,” he finished. “You still love me, and nothing has changed.”

I shook my head, and before I could give in and be the old Tate who reacted instead of rising above it, proving him right, I left. Slipping through the doors, back through the house, and out the front door.

Why did he still get to me? Why did I still . . .

I couldn’t finish the thought. Tears pricked the backs of my eyes as I dug for my keys, not caring that I was leaving Ben. The day was ruined now, anyway, even if he was crazy enough to still want to spend time with me.

I groaned, feeling my cell phone vibrate against my ass. I was tempted to ignore it, but I dug it out anyway.

She said yes!

I narrowed my eyes, studying my father’s text. And then closed them, feeling the first tears fall as my chest shook.

Not a damn thing has changed.

Everything changes.

Chapter 9

Jared

The clay of the thumbprint charm was as smooth as water as I ground it between my thumb and index finger. The tattered green ribbon had frayed along the edges after years of being handled, twisted, and abused.

But nothing had changed. It was still loved.

The green still held the same vibrant shade as the tree between our windows, and all of the small lines and curves of her tiny fingerprint had survived.

Weathered but still solid. Fragile but unbreakable.

I lifted the beer to my mouth, emptying the bottle and wishing I'd brought another.

Sitting in Madoc's empty and dark theater room, "Breath" by Breaking Benjamin playing throughout the house, I looked ahead at the black television screen—or screens, actually—seeing my own reflection staring back at me. And for the first time in two years, hating what I saw.

I was that guy again. The one who made her cry in high school. The one who broke her heart and stopped being her friend. The one who was a loser.

I was better than this. Why did I get in her face? Why did I always try to back her into a wall?

"Jared." My mother's voice fell behind me, and I blinked, coming out of my thoughts.

I slipped my empty bottle into the cup holder on the recliner and stood up, grabbing my jacket and sliding my arms into it.

"I thought you'd grown up," she said, sounding far from disappointed. She must've witnessed what happened with Tate. And with her stern eyes and tight lips, she was pissed.

I looked away, hardening my armor. "One of the many things I love about you, Mother, is that you're absolutely clueless as to who I am."

Her chin instantly lifted, and hurt flashed in her eyes, even though she tried

to hide it.

I looked away, shame heating my skin. She didn't show her anger, but she couldn't hide the pain in her eyes. It's not like my mom was clueless. She knew that she had burned some bridges with me.

And I almost always reminded her.

Her hand went to her stomach, and I looked down and exhaled, seeing her small frame carrying her new start.

"I'm sorry," I said, barely able to meet her eyes.

"So is that going to be a recurring thing?"

"What?" I asked. "Fighting with Tate?"

"Apologizing," she shot back.

Yeah, I did that a lot, too.

"You're not a child anymore," she scolded. "You have to start being the man you want your sons to be."

I shot my eyes up. *Sons*.

She knew how to make a point, didn't she?

"You've always bullied her." She sighed and took a seat. "Always. You might've been nicer about it when you were little, but all you had to do, even when you were eleven"—she smiled—"was hook an arm around her neck and lead her where you wanted her to go. And she always followed."

An image of eleven-year-old Tate riding on my handlebars as I had the bright idea to race up a ramp and try to fly through the air popped into my head. I'd broken a finger, and she'd needed six stitches.

"But you always protected her, too," she pointed out. "You jumped in front of her, shielding her from a fight or from danger."

I slid my hands into my pockets and watched her calm eyes look at me with love.

"But she was a girl then, Jared, and she's a woman now," she stated matter-of-factly, her tone growing harder. "A man who stands in front of a woman does nothing more than block her view. She needs a man standing next to her, so grow up."

I stopped breathing, feeling as if I'd just been slapped in the face. My mom was never motherly. And she certainly had no business giving others advice.

But fuck me, she was sounding kind of . . . smart, actually.

Tate didn't need to be handled. She was already so strong on her own, as she proved time and again. She needed someone to share things with. Someone to make her life better, not worse. Someone she could trust. Like a friend.

I used to be her friend. Whatever happened to that guy?

I shot my mother a look, never giving away that she'd gotten to me, and walked past her, up the stairs of the home theater.

"And Jared?" my mother called, and I stopped and turned my head back toward her.

"Her father is getting married," she announced. "He called tonight to give me a heads-up to keep an eye on her." And then she took a breath and looked at me pointedly. "Not that you're ever aware of anyone else's feelings but your own, but back off, okay? I'm sure she's a little tender right now."

James was getting married?

I turned around slowly as I searched my head for what that meant. He was selling the house. Tate was going to Stanford. He'd have a new wife when she came home for visits.

And where would her home be? What—or who—was the one thing, solid and constant, that she could count on?

I pushed open the fancy black curtains in my old bedroom in my old house—no doubt an upgrade Juliet had made once she and Jax took over the room after I'd moved out. Since they were still at Madoc's party, I had the place to myself, probably all night.

I threw my leather jacket on the chair in the corner and dug my cell phone out of my pocket, gazing through the forest of leaves to her darkened bedroom. No light, no movement, and no sound came from the house, but she had to be there. Her car was in the driveway.

Dialing her phone, I instantly caught sight of a small light—like a flickering star in a black sky—coming through the tree from her room. Her cell phone.

I watched as it flashed on and off with my rings, and then it went to voice mail, unanswered.

I squeezed my own phone, her silence hurting more than I wanted to admit. Tossing the phone onto the bed, I took off my shoes and socks and lifted up my window, slipping out, one arm and one leg at a time. I pressed my weight on the tree limbs, judging their strength.

After the damage done by the attempted cutting, I wasn't sure how weak the tree might be or how much heavier I might have gotten since the last time I'd climbed into her room.

Holding on to a limb above me, the familiar feel of the bark under my fingers comforting me, I stepped across the limb we'd sat on the first time we met each other and the limb she'd scraped her leg on when she was thirteen when she slipped.

Reaching her French doors, I swung them open, stepped on the railing, and leaped onto her floor.

She bolted up in bed, breathing hard, with fresh tears covering her face. She looked confused and shocked as she supported herself with her arms on the bed behind her.

"Jared?" Her voice cracked as she sniffled. "What the hell are you doing?"

I took in the sight of her pained eyes, the tears reaching her chin telling me she'd been crying for a while.

God, she killed me.

Her sadness used to give me power, making me strong. Now it just felt like a pair of pliers pinching my heart.

Her light blue tank top hugged every curve, and from the sliver of pink and thigh where the sheet didn't cover her, I could tell she was in her underwear. Her sunshine hair was parted on the side and fell over her chest in beautiful perfection. Even crying, she was the most perfect creature on the planet.

And just like twelve years ago when we'd sat next to each other in the tree for the first time, and I'd seen her sad about losing her mom recently, I didn't care who stood in my way or what I needed to do.

I just needed to be in her life.

"I heard about your dad," I told her. Every part of my body had relaxed, because this is where I was supposed to be.

She looked away, her defiant little chin lifting. "I'm fine."

I instantly walked toward the bed and leaned down, gently turning her chin back to me and putting my forehead to hers.

"I'm never letting you go again, Tate," I whispered, almost desperate. "I'm your friend forever, and if that's all I get, then that's what I'm taking, because only when you're here"—I took her hand and placed it on my heart—"do I feel like my life is worth a damn."

Her eyes pooled with more tears, and her chest rose and fell faster.

I cupped her face, rubbing circles on her wet cheek with my thumb. "Just let it go, babe. You wanna cry? Then, let it go."

She looked up at me, the tears in her eyes shaking as she searched mine, and I hoped like hell that she could find some trace of the boy who loved her

unconditionally.

And then, as if seeing it, she sucked in a breath, closed her eyes, and dropped her head, shaking with her despair and letting it all go.

I sat down and pulled her into my chest, lying down and holding her tight enough to convey that I would hold her forever if she wanted me to.

Her head rested in the crook where my arm met my shoulder, and her hand lay hesitantly on my stomach as she shuddered with the tears. I brought up my legs and just held her, suddenly warm with the realization that nothing had changed. I'd first shared a bed with her about ten years ago—two kids finding an anchor in each other when life had thrown us too many storms—and lying here, with the familiar shadows of the tree's leaves dancing across the ceiling, I felt as if it was yesterday.

She sniffled and wound her hand all the way around my waist. I rubbed circles on her back.

"It's so stupid," she mumbled, the ache making her voice thick. "I should be happy, shouldn't I?"

I just kept rubbing.

She inhaled a short, shaky breath. "I like Miss Penley, and my dad won't be alone," she cried. "Why can't I be happy?"

"Because you love your mom," I said, taking my other hand and lightly brushing the hair away from her face. "And because it's been just you and him for a long time. It's hard when things change."

She tipped her head up and looked at me, her eyes still wet and sad but calmer now.

I caressed her face. "Of course you're happy for your dad, Tate."

"What if he forgets my mom?"

"How could he?" I retorted. "He has you."

She looked at me, her eyes softening, and I pulled her in closer, tucking her head under my chin. Threading my fingers through her soft hair, I grazed her scalp and then dragged my hand down the strands over and over again.

Her body relaxed into mine, slowly melting like it always did.

"You know I turn dumb when you do that," she grumbled, but I noticed the drowsy tease in her tone.

I closed my eyes, loving the feel of her slender leg sliding up over the top of mine.

"I remember," I whispered. "Now go to sleep. Tatum."

I might've heard her say, "Asshole," but I couldn't be sure.

Chapter 10

Tate

Cheesecake.

I flopped onto my back, the pillow under my head feeling as soft as a cloud in a Disney sky after sleeping so well, and I was strangely desperate for cheesecake.

Sweet and creamy and heavenly, and I swallowed, suddenly starving to indulge.

What the . . . ?

I glanced over at the other pillow—empty, but the remnants of his body wash had lingered, and I was glad he was gone. The smell that he'd left behind was so succulent that my mouth was watering for chocolate-covered cherries, champagne, cheesecake, and . . .

Him. God, I was hungry.

It had felt so good to be in his arms last night that I'd slept better than I had in months and awoke feeling calm and excited at the same time.

Heading into the bathroom, I brushed my hair and put it up into a ponytail, washing and rinsing my face afterward. Grabbing the mouthwash, I gargled, ridding myself of the leftover bitter taste of the glass of wine I'd had when I came home last night.

I walked back into my bedroom, taking a second glance out the French doors, which were now closed, and noticed that his old bedroom window was still open.

Hesitating only a moment, I jetted down the stairs, ready to ravage the refrigerator and cabinets to make pancakes and eggs and bacon and maybe some fresh bread. And maybe a BLT.

For some reason a BLT sounded really good.

Why was I so hungry?

I jumped the last two steps and immediately straightened, hearing music coming from the dining room.

Taking a left, I rounded the entryway and halted when I spotted Jared.

The tree on his naked back stretched taller as he reached up and rolled paint in a long strip on the wall and then returned to normal as he came back down, the taut muscles in his back and arms flexing and accentuating the fact that he hadn't gotten lazy during his time away.

He was still wearing the same black pants as last night, but with his shirt off now, and I noticed his hands were splattered with drops of the café au lait color the painters were using as he rolled the thick paint onto the linen-colored walls.

"What are you doing?" I blurted.

His head turned to the side, and he glanced at me and then back to the wall, almost dismissive.

"We helped your dad paint this room, like, ten years ago, remember?"

I dug in my eyebrows, weirded out by how calm he seemed. "Yeah, I remember," I said, still confused as I walked over and turned down Seether's "Weak" coming off the iPod. "We're paying people to do it now. They'll be back to finish the job tomorrow," I told him.

He glanced at me again, a playful smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

And then he turned his attention back to the wall, dismissing me again, to continue painting.

I stood there, wondering what I was supposed to do. Go make a breakfast that I was no longer hungry for or kick him out?

He changed hands, putting the roller in his left as he absently smeared the paint that had dripped on his right hand on his pant leg. I almost laughed. The pants looked expensive, but of course, Jared wouldn't give a shit.

I folded my arms across my chest, trying to restrain my smile.

Jared was painting my dining room. Just like ten years ago. He wasn't grabbing me, fighting with me, or trying to get in my pants, either. Very well behaved.

Also like ten years ago.

Patience and peace radiated off of him, and my heart skipped a beat, finally feeling some semblance of home for the first time in forever. It was a summer day just like any other, and the boy next door was hanging out with me.

I buried the knot of despair I'd been carrying around and walked up behind him, picking up the second roller in the tray. Stepping up to the wall perpendicular to his, I rolled on the paint, hearing his uninterrupted strokes continue behind me.

We worked in silence, and I kept stealing glances at him, nervous about

whose move it was to talk or what I would say. But he just bent over, running the roller through the tray and sopping up more paint, looking completely at ease.

We took turns, collecting more paint and spreading it over the walls, and after several minutes, my heartbeat finally slowed to a gentle drumming.

Until he put his hand on my back.

At his closeness, I stiffened, but then he reached around to my other side and grabbed the stepladder to take it back to his area.

Oh.

I continued rolling paint as he stepped up and worked closer to the ceiling, using a regular paintbrush to get areas neither of us could reach with the roller. I tried to ignore his body hovering over me as I worked my paint to the edge underneath him, but I couldn't help how good it felt to have him close. Like the magnets were aligning again.

Like waking up to a summer rain tinkling against my window.

"You can't use the roller to corner," Jared spoke up, knocking me back into the moment.

I blinked, looking up to see his hand pausing midstroke on the wall and that he was staring down at me. I glanced to my roller, seeing that I'd run right into the next wall.

I mock scowled up at him. "It's working, isn't it?"

He exhaled a laugh, like I was so ridiculous, and climbed down, shoving the paintbrush at me.

"Handle that." He gestured to his brush and motioned me up the ladder. "And try not to fuck up the crown molding."

I snatched the brush out of his hand and climbed the ladder, glancing at him as I started to brush on short strokes and making sure not to cross the blue painter's tape.

Jared grinned up at me, shaking his head before resuming my sloppy painting with a smaller brush, moving vertically down the corners in slow strokes.

I took a deep breath and ventured, "So . . ." I glanced down at him. "Are you happy?" I asked. "In California. Racing . . ." I trailed off, not sure if I wanted to hear about his life out there.

He kept his eyes on his task, his voice thoughtful. "I wake up," he started, "and I can't wait to get into the shop to work on the bikes. Or the car . . .," he added. "I love my job. It happens in a hundred different rooms, cities, and arenas."

I could have guessed that much. From what I'd seen of his career through the media, he had looked in his element. Comfortable, thriving, driven . . .

He hadn't answered the question, though.

"I breathe fresh air all day every day," he went on, leaning down to give Madman a quick pet, and my brushstrokes slowed as I listened to him. "I love racing, Tate. But honestly, it's a means to a bigger end." He looked up at me, giving a half smile. "I started my own business. I want to build custom rides."

My eyes went wide, and I stopped painting.

"Jared, that's . . ." I stammered, trying to get the words out. "That's really amazing," I said, finally smiling. "And it's a relief, too. That you'll be off the track, I mean. I'm always afraid you'll get in an accident when I see you on TV or YouTube."

His eyebrows pinched together, and I winced.

Shit.

"You watch?" he asked in an amused tone, looking at me like I'd been caught.

I pursed my lips and redirected my attention back to painting. "Of course I watch," I grumbled.

I heard him laugh under his breath as he started painting again, too.

"It'll still mean some travel," he continued, "but less than what I do now. Plus, I can build the business back here if I want."

Back here?

So he might want to come back home, then? I looked away, liking the idea of him moving back, and I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like I was going to be here anymore, anyway.

He let out a sigh, regarding his work on the wall. "I love the wind out there on the track, Tate. On the highways." He shook his head, looking almost sad. "It's the only time you and I are together."

I looked back down at him, a lump swelling my throat.

I saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "I never wanted other women." His thick voice was practically a whisper. "I left so I could be a man for you. So I could come back to you."

I dropped my eyes, slowly stepping down the ladder.

That was what had been so hard to understand. He had to go off and find himself—cutting me out of his life—by breaking up with me under the guise of not wanting to hold me back while he took however many years to get his shit together?

I locked my eyes on his dark ones and looked up at him, seeing a man who was so much the same, and yet, so different.

But maybe it hadn't been a guise after all.

Maybe I was lucky, because I always knew where my direction pointed me, and I had it figured out. Maybe Jared had had too many downward spirals, too many distractions, and too much doubt to know what truly drove him.

Maybe Jared, like most people, needed the space to grow on his own.

Maybe we had just started too young.

"And what about the next time you need to shut me out, Jared?" I asked, licking my parched lips. "It was three years in high school. Two years this time."

He put his hand on my cheek, his thumb grazing the corner of my mouth. "It wasn't two years, babe."

I eyed him. What was he talking about?

He bent down, wetting his paintbrush some more. "I came back at Christmas that same year. You were . . ." He hesitated, rolling the paint onto the wall. "You had moved on."

I averted my eyes, because I knew right away what he was talking about.

"What did you see?" I asked, fiddling with the brush. I shouldn't feel bad. I had every right to move on, after all.

He shrugged. "Only as much as I could handle. Which wasn't a lot." He glanced at me, holding my eyes.

I could tell he was trying to keep his temper in check.

"I showed up one night," he started. "I'd just gotten started on the circuit, racing and making connections. I was feeling good and"—he nodded—"really confident, actually. So I came home."

Six months. Only six months.

"I knew you were mad at me. You wouldn't talk when I called or text back, but I was finally a little proud of myself, but I was never going to be truly happy without you, too." He dropped his voice to nearly a whisper. "I showed up, and you were with someone."

He blinked a few times, and I felt my stomach roll because I'd hurt him. I wanted to throw up.

Is that what Pasha had been talking about? The time she saw him almost cry?

But I shouldn't feel bad about this. Jared had had sex with numerous women before we were together, and I'm sure plenty since we'd been apart.

"It was six months, Jared." I grabbed some paper towels and turned to him,

cleaning up the paint on his hands. “I’m sure you had been with someone else by that point.”

He stepped closer, reaching up to play with a lock of my hair. “No,” he whispered. “I hadn’t been with anyone.”

My eyes shot up. “But . . .” I winced, my gut clenching. “I saw you. I saw girls everywhere around you. At the tracks, hanging on you in pictures . . .”

I hadn’t moved on because I thought he had, but I never thought he was holding back, either. I assumed . . .

He let out a hard sigh, turning back to his painting. “The girls come with the crowd, Tate. Sometimes they want pictures with the drivers. Other times they just hang around like groupies. I never wanted anyone but you. That’s not why I left.”

A flutter swarmed through my chest, and I knew that my heart still wanted him, too. No one else had even held a candle to him.

“It was so hard living without you, Tate.” His voice sounded weary. “I wanted to see you and talk to you, and I’d lived so long with you as the center of everything, I just . . .” He hesitated, his voice turning thick. “I didn’t know who I was or what I was going to offer you. I relied on you too much.”

I looked down, realizing that he’d been wiser than me. Jared left because he knew he needed me too much. I hadn’t realized how much I needed him until he was already gone.

“I relied on you, too.” I choked over my words. “I said it in my monologue senior year, Jared. You were something I looked forward to every day. After you left, I constantly felt as if the wind had been knocked out of me.”

In our final year of high school, when I’d finally had enough of my childhood friend bullying me, I stood up in front of the whole class and shared our story. The loss, the heartbreak, the pain . . . They didn’t know what they were hearing, but it didn’t matter. I was only speaking to Jared anyway.

His timid eyes urged me as he said, “And now?”

I sighed as I absentmindedly dipped the brush in paint. “And now,” I led in, “I know I can stand on my own. No matter what happens, I’ll be okay.”

He looked back to the wall, responding almost sadly. “Of course you will.” And then he asked, “So are *you* happy?” He repeated my own question to him back to me, and I wondered why he asked that. I’d just said I’d be okay.

But I guess he knew that didn’t exactly mean I was happy, either.

No.

No, I wasn’t happy. He had been a piece of the puzzle, and nothing had

filled the space in his absence.

I ignored the question and kept painting.

“Do you have anyone out there now?” I ventured. “Anyone you’re seeing?”

I brushed the wall in short, quick strokes, like I was petting Madman, as I watched him warily.

He dipped the brush into the paint. “After I saw that you’d moved on, I tried to as well,” he told me. “I’ve seen a couple of women since then, but . . .” He stopped and gave me a teasing sideways glance. “No one’s waiting for me.”

I cocked an eyebrow, digging the brush into the wall. *A couple of women.*

Now I was jealous.

“I’m proud of you for getting into Stanford.” He changed the subject, throwing me off. “Are you excited?” he asked.

I nodded, giving him a tight smile. “Yeah, I am. It’ll be a lot of work, but I thrive on it, so . . .” I trailed off, swallowing the lump in my throat.

I did want to go to California. And I definitely wanted to go to medical school. But I didn’t want to think about how things were changing forever back here. My dad’s marriage. The house going on the market. Having Jared close, but not having Jared.

He stopped painting and looked at me pointedly. “What’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem,” I retorted.

He approached me, cocking his head like he knew I was lying. Like he knew I still wasn’t happy.

I lifted my shoulders to my ears, denying it. “I said there’s no problem!” I laughed and then looked down. “And you’re dripping all over my feet!”

I curled in my toes as paint from his brush fell onto my skin.

“Oh, shit,” he said in surprise and lifted the brush up, smacking me in the face.

I growled, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Oh, shit!” Jared blurted out again, laughing. “I’m sorry. It honestly was an accident.”

“Yeah.” I opened my eyes again, squinting through the paint covering my lashes on my left eye. “Accidents happen.”

And then I shot out, running my paintbrush down his face and chest, sending him rearing backward.

“No!” he shouted, holding out his hands and still laughing. “Stop!”

I lunged for him again, and he darted out his paint brush, wetting my arm.

I scowled. “Ugh!” I barked. “You’re going to pay for that!”

And I raced after him as he dashed into the foyer. Reaching out my arm, I caught him on the back, swiping my brush up and making the tree tattooed there look a little snow covered.

He swung around and grabbed my wrist, pulling my back into his chest.

I squirmed, sending his brush falling to the area rug.

“Let go!” he ordered, tickling my sides. “Drop it now!”

“No!” I laughed, keeping my elbows locked at my sides to shield myself from his attack.

He grabbed my wrist, pulled it up, exposing my underarm, and tickled. I hunched over, crying out in a mix of terror and delight as my own paintbrush fell to the floor.

“Jared! Stop!” I shouted, my stomach tight with laughing so hard.

He let go, wrapping both of his arms around my waist, and we just stood there, breathing hard as we tried to calm down.

It felt so good. Having fun with him again.

I laid my arms on his, my breath catching in my throat but my heart still racing as I soaked in his heat at my back. My tank top was the only fabric separating his skin from mine, and without thinking, I turned my head, nuzzling into him.

His hot breath fell on my ear, and I leaned into it, feeling the clenching of the muscles in my womb and wanting his touch.

It had been so long since I'd been touched like this. The feel of Jared's lips against my hair was more intimate than the most sexual act anyone else could do to me.

I tipped my chin up, teasing him with my lips as they grazed his. A thrill shot through me, sending flutters through my stomach as I felt him grow hard against my ass.

I inhaled his scent. “Jared,” I barely whispered. I darted out my tongue and flicked it along his top lip.

He jerked, sucking in a breath, and I felt a shot of pride at still being able to leave him speechless.

Craning one hand around my face to hold my mouth close to his, he teased, “I thought we were going to be friends.” And then I gasped as he brought his other hand over my shoulder and slid it down the top of my shirt, claiming my breast in his palm.

I closed my eyes on a moan. “Good friends,” I clarified. “Really good friends.” And I felt his lips curl into a smile against mine.

“Tate!”

A knock sounded on the door, and I jumped, blinking.

What?

No.

“Tate, you up?” Fallon said, and I looked at Jared, feeling my body suddenly go cold. *Damn it.*

The ache where I needed him made me groan, and I watched him blink long and hard, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“Fuck,” he seethed, letting me go.

I could still feel him through his pants, standing strong and hard, and it was for me. *Goddamn it, Fallon!*

She opened the door, and we both straightened, knowing how guilty we looked. I was sure I had a blush all over my body. I could feel the heat of my skin.

“Oh.” She stopped short, her forehead scrunching up. “Hey.”

I shifted my eyes, smoothing down my clothes. “We were painting.”

Jared snorted behind me, but I ignored him.

Fallon nodded. “In your jammies,” she said more to herself than to us. “Perfectly normal.”

I arched a brow at her as she stood there in her workout shorts and tank. We ran on Sundays, and I was late.

“Jared?” I cleared my throat, unable to hide the amusement from my face as I turned around. “Go home.”

He shot me his little know-it-all smirk, and I jerked when he brushed his palm over my ass and then walked past me, out the front door. Leaning down, he gave Fallon a peck on the forehead. “Your timing sucks,” he grumbled and walked past her.

Chapter 11

Tate

My friends each brought something different into my life.

Juliet believed that love conquered all and everyone deserved a white-picket-fence life. Fallon believed that choices came with confusion, and if we truly knew what we wanted, then there was no choice. Jax believed opportunities shouldn't be wasted, and the bigger the risk, the bigger the reward.

And Madoc was like me. He was the one I listened to when I wanted to hear my own opinion in a deeper voice.

And the best part about him was that I was a separate entity from Jared to him. He cared about my well-being, even if it didn't serve the interest of his friend.

Sorry about your party, I texted him after I got back from my run with Fallon. I'd produced enough drama over the past two years, and I always felt like I wasn't carrying my weight as a friend. Madoc never cared, though.

Madoc: Nothing to be sorry for. You okay?

I grabbed an apple and jogged up the stairs, desperate for a shower, as my clothes were sticking to my skin.

Yes, I typed. I'll be okay. Don't worry.

Madoc: You need to talk to Ben.

I halted, dropping my head back and sighing. *Jesus*. It was like he could read my mind.

I tapped my thumbs on the keys, sending my reply. I don't even know what's happening yet, okay?

Madoc shot back. Yes, you do.

I rolled my eyes, kicking off my shoes and hitting the power on my iPod dock, hearing "The Boys of Summer" by the Ataris spring forth.

My phone beeped again. Okay, screw Jared. Answer me this . . . do you think about Ben?

I plopped my phone down on the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. I

wasn't ignoring his question. He just didn't need to hear the answer.

Sure, I thought about Ben. I didn't think about him like I thought about Jared, though, and that's what had me a little ashamed.

Ben and I hadn't committed to seeing only each other, and we hadn't gotten intimate yet. But I knew he wanted that. Hell, he'd wanted it in high school.

But we were dating, and if Fallon hadn't walked in this morning, I would've gone over the edge with Jared, despite any obligation I might have to Ben.

My phone beeped with another text, and I looked down, almost kicking myself that I'd texted Madoc at all this morning.

Do you want him, need him, and live for him? Madoc asked.

I shook my head, smiling at my friend's insight. *Yeah, okay.* So whether or not Jared was a factor, I still wasn't getting carried away and feeling all lovey-dovey about Ben. Point taken.

Does he make you horny? Madoc continued, and I snatched up my phone again.

"Seriously?" I blurted out at his crass vocabulary.

Do you want to crawl all over him in the morning? he went on, and I let out a loud sigh.

Yeah. Shut up now.

I juttled out my thumbs, typing to tell him just that, when another text rolled in before I finished.

What the hell? Did he take lessons in speed texting?

Does he give you a lady boner? he teased. Make your loins quiver and throb? Do you masturbate to him?

"Madoc!" I growled at my phone, squeezing it tight. "What the . . . ?"

Why so quiet? My phone beeped again. Answer my questions, Tate!

Motherf . . . I clenched my teeth. "I'd talk if you'd just shut up, jackass," I fumed.

He texted again, and I just slumped my shoulders, walking back into the bedroom, defeated.

Okay, real quick: Ben or Jared? he inquired.

Huh?

Ben or Jared? he urged again. Don't think. Just say the first name that pops into your head.

My mouth fell open, exhaling a frustrated sigh. "Wha . . ."

Ben or Jared!!! he text-screamed.

My thumbs shook as I tried to type, but my brain felt like little electric wires were zapping every hair follicle on my scalp.

I squeezed the phone, trying to find the letters.

Now! he beeped.

“Ugh!” I plopped down on my bed, crashing back on the mattress and pounding the sides with my fists, giving up.

Jerk.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to remember what the point of the conversation had been.

Madoc was Madoc. He’d drive you crazy with fifteen questions so you’d figure out the answer on your own, rather than take two seconds to give you the answer himself. He felt the journey was more important than the destination.

Just like me.

I slipped my hand into my hair and rubbed my scalp, exhaling a laugh at the irony.

My phone beeped in my palm, and I groaned.

Gosh, you’re quiet today.

I shook my head, amused and exhausted at the same time. I brought my phone up above me, typing my response.

Very funny.

His response came immediately. Shall I tell you what to do?

Yes, I replied.

But you already know.

I typed quickly. Tell me anyway.

His text took only a moment. You tell the guy you’re dating that your boyfriend’s back.

I let my arms drift back down to the bed as I closed my eyes, sighing. *Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too.*

My phone beeped again. And he’s gonna be in trouble . . .

What the . . . ?

Hey-la,hey-la, my boyfriend's back, he continued singing, and laughter tickled my throat.

"You're on crack," I whispered to myself.

I bit my lip between my teeth, and the warm sensation of anticipation started filling me for the first time in years. I brought up my phone and typed.

You see him comin', better cut out on the double, I continued the lyrics, smiling.

He texted again as I headed for the bathroom to shower.

Very good, my young Padawan. Very good.

After I'd showered and cleaned up, I put on some old jean shorts and a black T-shirt to work on my car. Despite the lack of rain—my favorite kind of weather—the sky was beautiful, with barely any clouds, and the light breeze blew the fragrant summer scents through all the windows in the house.

I bounced down the stairs—with new energy in my step—and stopped to listen wistfully at the boys' music carrying through the air from next door. I glanced out the window and spotted Madoc, Jax, and Jared all hanging outside around Jax's Mustang and looking under the hood.

Jared had changed into jeans, and he had a white T-shirt hanging out of his back pocket, and oh, my God . . . a light layer of sweat cooled my back as I took in the sight of the smooth, muscular slope of his back from his neck down to his waist.

The sun beat down on his bare skin, good tunes completed the scene, and I didn't want to be anywhere else.

Heading into my garage, I hit the door opener, the wash of sunlight hitting the tires and then the hood and front windshield of my dad's old Chevy Nova.

I grabbed a clean shop cloth off a worktable and slipped it into my back pocket before tying up my hair into a ponytail.

My feet tingled inside my ratty old black Chucks, so before I could chicken out, I walked outside.

I immediately felt Jared's eyes on me as I unlocked my car, reached in the driver's side door, and popped the hood. I was trying not to look across my yard to where he was, but then I realized that was a little childish.

So I looked over as I lifted the hood and saw Fallon heading toward me.

Behind her was Jared, with his back to me and looking over his shoulder. Those damn brown eyes weren't on my face, though.

With his eyebrows pinched together, he looked almost angry as his gaze slid up my legs, slowly traveling up my thighs and to my waist. The legion of butterflies you usually get on a roller coaster was now fluttering between my legs, and I breathed out a slow breath to calm myself down.

His hungry gaze met mine, and then he turned around, a model of control.

But that's the thing. If Jared hadn't really changed that much, then the need he was feeling wasn't being forced away.

It was collecting.

And fuck me if I was in his line of sight when it overloaded.

I dove into my garage, assembling the few tools I'd need as Fallon grabbed a stool from the workbench to hang out with me as she watched. "Wish You Hell" by Like a Storm carried over from Jax's yard, and I busied myself, diving under my hood to perform maintenance work.

During the next hour, Juliet arrived after finishing her volunteer tutoring sessions at the high school. She dashed over, gave Jax a seriously long kiss, and then joined Fallon and me as I replaced some spark plugs, cleaned out some connections, and performed the regular weekly stuff like checking my oil and the pressure on my tires.

"Hey."

I looked up from under the hood to see Jared's assistant, Pasha, approach.

"Mind if I hang out?" she asked.

I jerked my chin to another stool. "Of course not. Have a seat."

She hopped up on the stool, lifting her glasses to the top of her head. She was quiet and cute, and I was really relieved that she seemed easy to get along with, despite her attitude.

Even with the jet black hair with purple chunks, and the eyebrow piercings and studded black belt, she still looked incredibly innocent. She wore skinny jeans and a black and gray flannel shirt, rolled up at the sleeves. Her hair was curled into loose waves, and other than the heavy makeup on her eyes, she was fresh faced.

Juliet kicked her flats to the ground and put her feet up on a footrest on the stool. "So Madoc's pressuring you pretty hard?" she asked Fallon, continuing their conversation about Madoc wanting kids.

Fallon nodded, swallowing the drink she'd just taken from her water bottle. "Yeah," she said with a sigh. "I mean, he's not giving me a guilt trip or anything,

but damn . . .” She laughed.

I grinned, gazing over under my eyelashes to watch Jared get down on the ground to reach under the car for something. His thick arms, smeared with grease, the sun and sweat on his tight stomach . . .

I looked away.

“Hi,” I heard a male voice behind me.

I dipped my head, getting out from under the hood to see Ben.

“Hey,” I blurted out, surprised.

He had his hands in his pockets, and he smiled, looking expectant. Or hesitant.

I pulled out my shop cloth and wiped the few smudges from my hands. Fallon and Juliet had stopped talking, Pasha had gotten up to go explore my garage, and Ben and I had an ocean between us.

It wasn’t easy like it had been two days ago.

I looked to my friends, trying to look calm. “Just a minute, you guys,” I told them, and I didn’t miss the glance they exchanged.

I inched past Ben, giving us some space beyond their ears.

Standing close, it was hard to meet his eyes, but I did. “Ben, I’m really sorry about the past couple of days,” I spoke softly. “I know things have been awkward.”

My gut twisted, and I didn’t want to hurt him. I almost wished he was a jerk so this could be easier.

“I know.” He nodded, looking around before meeting my eyes. “But I think I know why.”

His eyes flashed to Jax’s house, and I followed his gaze, seeing Jared with his back to us, but leaning his hands on the hood and peering over his shoulder, watching.

“He doesn’t pull my strings,” I explained. “Medical school is looming, and with the house going up for sale, everything is just—”

“So he’s not the reason I haven’t slept over?” Ben interrupted. “Or barely gotten you alone in two days?”

He wasn’t mad. His raised eyebrows and gentle tone told me he already knew the answers. It wasn’t that Ben expected sex, but he knew it was the next step between us. I’d been warm, and now I’d gone cold.

I frowned, wishing he wasn’t right.

I knew I still wanted Jared. The chemistry hadn’t changed, and no matter what we failed at, we were great in the bedroom.

But there was still love there, too. More than ever, actually. I didn't know if I wanted him back, and I wasn't ready to make that decision yet, but I knew I didn't want Ben with the same passion.

And he didn't deserve anything less.

He gave me a sad smile and leaned in. "I'm glad you gave me a shot." He kissed my cheek. "Good luck at Stanford."

And he turned around, walking back to his car.

I watched him go, feeling a little regretful. He'd made it too easy for me. But no matter what happened, it was the right thing to do.

I turned around, refusing to meet Jared's eyes, because I knew he was still watching, and I headed back for my car. Pasha still stood in the garage, looking after Ben's ride as he sped off down the street, while Juliet and Fallon had continued their conversation.

"Well." Fallon rubbed her neck, acting like they hadn't been trying to eavesdrop. "I'm determined to make the most of this time with just the two of us, but you know Madoc . . ." She trailed off, sounding amused. "The more the merrier. He wants five. I said one. We compromised at five."

Juliet busted up laughing, and I realized they were still talking about Madoc's plans to knock up his wife ASAP. Fallon still had two years of graduate school at Northwestern, though, so I knew she'd rather wait.

"Is this your mom?" Pasha called out.

I looked up to see her leaning over a workbench, regarding a frame on the wall. I knew the picture that hung there. My mom, dad, and me at Disneyland when I was five.

"Yeah," I answered, fastening the last cap under my hood.

"How did she pass away?" she asked.

I shot my eyes over to her, confused. "How did you know my mom died?"

Her mouth fell open slightly, and she hesitated.

"Um . . . I," she stammered, her eyebrows doing a nosedive as she searched for words. "Well, I . . ."

And then she huffed out a breath, looking at me with an apology in her eyes.

"He kind of has me send flowers to her grave every year on April fourteenth," she admitted, wincing.

I stood frozen, my hand on the cap while I gaped at Pasha. "What?" I whispered, in too much shock.

"Tate." Juliet's mouth hung open, and I saw her eyes tear up.

I darted my eyes over to Jared, seeing him let the hood drop closed and smile at his brother, a joke passing between them.

“Please don’t tell him I told you,” Pasha grumbled. “He’ll bitch, and then I’ll have to listen to it.”

Flowers. He sent my mother flowers.

How had I not known that?

I guess I still would’ve been at college every April, but my father should’ve known. Wouldn’t he have told me?

“What are they doing?” Fallon spoke up, and I looked to see her confused expression focusing over at the guys all slipping on their shirts and hopping in the Mustang with Jared in the driver’s seat.

“Jax?” Juliet called, standing up.

He stuck his top half out the passenger side window, looking at her over the hood. “We’re just taking the car for a test drive!” he shouted over the deep rumble of the engine. “Be right back!”

Jared slipped on his black sunglasses and gripped the wheel, the tight cords of his forearm visible from here. He shot me a quick glance, the hint of a smile on his lips, before jacking up the music and backing out of the driveway.

And, as if the thunder had only been waiting for the lightning, he roared down the street like a tempest that could not be contained.

My heart fluttered, wanting to be a part of the storm.

I smiled at my friends. “Get in the car.”

“What?” Juliet’s back straightened, and Fallon started rubbing her hands together.

“Aw, yeah,” she teased, standing up.

“What are we doing?” Juliet asked, looking nervous as Pasha stepped forward.

I ignored the question and simply waggled my eyebrows, ready for some mischief, as all three of them piled into my G8.

Chapter 12

Jared

“So . . .” Madoc rested his arm on the passenger side door, tapping his fingers as I drove. “Two days. You still haven’t lost your touch, huh?”

I held the steering wheel with my left hand, my arm steel-rod straight as I pressed my back into the seat. “What do you mean?”

“She just broke up with Ben,” he pointed out, talking about Tate. “You know that’s what that was about just now.”

I pulled down into fourth, picking up speed. “I don’t know shit.”

“Don’t give me that,” he retorted. “You’re already planning how you’re going to get in her bed tonight.”

I exhaled a laugh, glancing out the window. *Fuckin’ Madoc.*

When I saw Ben show up, I’d immediately tensed, hating how he looked at her. Knowing what he wanted from her. I had no idea if they were sleeping together, and I didn’t care. As far as I was concerned, she was done killing time.

Madoc was wrong. I didn’t want in her bed. I mean, I wanted that, but most of all, I just wanted her back.

“I’ve got an idea,” Jax piped up from the backseat.

I met his eyes in the rearview mirror, seeing his fingers locked on top of his head as he slouched down in the seat.

“What’s that, little brother?” Madoc inquired.

Jax smirked at me as he spoke to Madoc. “Well, he could just get over it and ask her to marry him already.”

I instantly froze, staring out the front windshield.

Marry. My fist tightened around the steering wheel, wondering how my brother thought that either of us was ready for that. Or was he just tossing any crazy idea out there?

I never thought I wouldn’t marry Tate. But it still seemed far off.

Madoc was looking at me, and I knew Jax was waiting for a reaction, but this was none of their business. I wanted Tate forever, but first I needed to get

her back. Why the hell would she say yes now?

Jax cleared his throat. "You two have loved each other the longest," he said softly. "Doesn't seem right that you'll be the last to get married."

My eyes shot up, locking with his in the mirror. "What?" I blurted out.

"You little shit." Madoc twisted his head, regarding Jax with shock.

The last to get married? Meaning . . .

Jax's eyes dropped to his lap, and I'd never seen him so vulnerable. "I can't sleep without her next to me," he almost whispered about Juliet. "I love coming home and smelling her cooking. Seeing how warm she makes the house." He still wasn't looking at either of us, and my chest felt tight.

"She gives me everything," he continued, looking up at both of us. "I want to give her my name. I'm going to ask her."

"When?" Madoc asked, and I was surprised he could talk, because I was still trying to wrap my head around it.

Jax was going to ask Juliet to marry him.

"After Zack's bachelor party on Friday," he answered. "I'm guessing that after she becomes my fiancée, going to strip clubs will probably be on my list of don'ts."

Shit. The bachelor party. The one I wasn't planning on attending, since I didn't think I'd be in town.

I'd forgotten about that.

Zack, Jax's partner at the Loop, who helped run races, had been engaged for as long as I'd known him. Finally ready to take the leap, he'd sent out a mass e-mail, inviting every guy in town over the age of twenty-one to Wicked, a high-end club about a half hour away.

I was surprised Fallon and Juliet were letting them go at all. Well, not Fallon, actually. She never struck me as the jealous type.

I gave a casual glance behind me, trying to hide the doubt I was feeling. Not that my brother wouldn't make a good husband or Juliet a good wife, but he was still only twenty-one.

"Jax," I started. "Are you sure—"

"Hey," Madoc cut in. "What the hell?" He peered out through my open driver's side window.

I followed his gaze, my eyebrows instantly pinching together.

What the . . . ?

Tate pulled up on my side in her G8, with Fallon riding shotgun, and Juliet and Pasha in the back.

She sat in her seat, looking comfortable and casual, and I shook my head at her, because she was in the oncoming lane.

“You’re in the wrong lane!” I shouted to Fallon’s closed window.

She stuck her hand behind her ear, mouthing, *What?* and then turned to Tate, both of them smiling.

“What the hell are they doing?” Jax sat up, resting his arms over the front seat.

I glanced ahead, noticing the stop sign, and shot out my foot, coming to a screeching halt.

Shit.

Tate stopped, too, and she and Fallon bounced forward with the sudden movement.

I darted my head out. “Roll down your window!” I shouted, shifting my gaze past the stop sign to watch for oncoming cars.

Was she trying to get them all hurt?

Tate’s mouth curled in amusement, but Fallon was full-on smiling as she rolled down the window.

“Where are you guys going?” Madoc shouted before I had a chance.

“Doesn’t matter.” Fallon shrugged. “We’ll be going too fast for you to follow.”

My eyes widened, while Madoc and Jax laughed, feigning insult. “Ohhhh.”

Madoc nudged my arm. “They’re talking shit, Jared,” he egged me on, and I bit back the smile as I felt the rush in my muscles.

Stepping out of the car—since the street was dead anyway—I walked to Tate’s car and leaned down to Fallon’s window.

“Is that a challenge?” I asked Tate.

She shook her head, trying to brush me off. “I wouldn’t waste my time,” she taunted. “I’ve already beaten you once.”

I smiled, arching an eyebrow. “Have you?” I jabbed back, insinuating that I’d let her win our one and only race four years ago.

Her face fell, turning stern with pursed lips, as she focused back on the road, revving the engine.

I walked back to my car, laughing under my breath. “Put on your seat belts,” I ordered Madoc and Jax as I climbed in and buckled up myself.

Madoc quickly grabbed for his seat belt, his breath shaky with amusement. I revved the engine, seeing Tate eye me as she did the same. I loved the look of mischief on her face.

“Guys,” Jax inched out. “The cops look the other way for like five minutes on Saturday nights when my crew does this, but—”

“You have your seat belt on?” Madoc interrupted, yelling through my window to Fallon. “Get it on!” he ordered his wife.

“You, too.” I heard Jax shout and turned to see Juliet saluting him. “Shit,” he cursed behind me, and I knew he hated what was about to happen.

Madoc tuned the iPod to Mötley Crüe’s “Girls, Girls, Girls,” and I looked at him.

He shrugged, looking innocent. “Don’t look at me. It’s on your iPod, man.”

I rolled my eyes, not willing to explain that I wasn’t the one loading music onto it. Pasha liked to mess with me. Every once in a while, a Britney Spears or Lady Gaga song wound up tucked between a Slipknot and a Korn song.

Regardless, I jacked up the volume and turned down the air-conditioning. The heat outside kept me irritable and alert. A lesson I’d learned over the past two years.

I heard “Blow Me Away” by Breaking Benjamin spilling out of Tate’s speakers, and I looked over, shaking my head and unable to hide the smile.

“You ready?” I shouted.

“You sure?” she shot back.

Little . . . Did she forget that I did this for a living?

“Right on Main, go through two stop lights,” I dared her, “and the first one back to the houses wins,” I told her.

Without hesitation, she nodded.

“Ready!” Madoc shouted, and Tate and I both revved our engines again and again, looking at each other, my foot getting heavier by the second.

“Set!” Madoc called again, and Fallon’s excitement overcame her as her arm smacked the outside of her door over and over again.

Tate met my eyes, and then we both turned back to the road, ready.

“Go!” Madoc roared, and all hell broke loose.

“Shit!” I hissed.

Tate and I shot off, but she must’ve been sitting in second gear, because she didn’t hesitate to pick up speed as she shot forward and then cut right in front of me, just in time to miss the pickup truck that sat at the stop sign ahead of us.

“I told you she was good,” Jax said matter-of-factly, but I ignored him.

Slamming down into second and then up into third, I punched the gas, swerving to the left, now that she’d taken my lane, and sped up beside her.

Madoc held on to the handle above the door, glancing over at them

anxiously. I shifted down into fourth, inching ahead and thankful for the deserted street.

“Jared, get over in the other lane,” Jax advised.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” I barked, pushing the gas until I’d gotten up to sixth.

Looking ahead, I spotted a white sedan headed our way, and my heart lodged in my throat, seeing it in my line of driving.

My neck craned to see Tate, a flash of fire in her eyes, and she shook her head at me, telling me not to even try it.

“Jared,” Jax warned as Madoc held on.

I floored it, staying head to head with Tate.

“Jared!” Jax yelled, and I heard the white sedan honking frantically.

Tate’s scared eyes flashed to mine, and I smiled. Twisting the wheel, the muscles aching in my arms, I put the front and back driver’s side tires on the curb, feeling the car bottom out before I got the angle I needed.

“Goddamn it!” Jax cursed, and Madoc laughed.

The white car zoomed between Tate’s and my rides, still honking. I looked over, seeing Tate turning her head nervously to look behind her, so I took my shot.

Powering ahead, I picked up ten more miles per hour and jerked the wheel to the right, into her lane with just enough space to cut her off.

“Whoa!” Madoc roared, and I caught sight of Jax in my rearview mirror with his head back, hands over his eyes.

I shook my head and tipped my chin down, focusing in on the road ahead. Luckily, this street didn’t allow curb parking, so there was plenty of room and no vehicles hiding pedestrians.

Coming up on Main, I braked, spinning the wheel to the right and shifting down to reduce the car’s speed.

“Go, go!” Madoc shouted as I heard Tate’s tires screech behind me.

I glanced in my rearview mirror and noticed that she spun out, but she recovered almost as quickly.

“Everyone keep your eyes open,” I gritted out. “There’s going to be a shitload of people up here.”

While Sundays were sleepy in the neighborhoods—until afternoon, anyway—the center of town was always bustling. People shopped, lunched, took in a movie, or just enjoyed the square.

I sped ahead, while Tate weaved back and forth behind me, trying to get a

look at what was ahead. I could also see the excited movements of the other three girls.

“Oh, shit!” Jax yelled, and I jerked my eyes back to the road.

I slammed on the brakes—seeing a company van backing out of a driveway and into the street—while Tate swerved around me, taking the oncoming lane to go around and zoom ahead of me.

“Fuck!” I growled, jerking the wheel and following behind her.

“Why didn’t you just go around?” Jax shouted, taking off his seat belt and moving closer to the front.

“Piss off,” I barked and then looked ahead at her significant gain. “God, she’s good.”

I heard Jax swallow. “Yeah, she’s got great reflexes. Better than you, apparently.”

Shifting into fifth, I picked up speed and then punched into sixth, starting to see the first stoplight ahead.

“Come on,” Madoc urged, and I pushed my back hard into the seat, squeezing the wheel.

Juliet and Pasha kept turning around, checking us out through the back window. Pedestrians on the sidewalk started taking notice, and I spotted them in my rearview mirror spinning around to watch the two speeding assholes—as they were probably calling us right now—barrel down their street. Some guys went wide-eyed, pointing as both our cars raced by, and I heard a cheer through the open windows.

The light ahead turned red, and Tate slammed on her brakes, the high-pitched screeching bringing everyone’s attention outside straight to us.

I punched the brakes with everything I had, skidding to a halt right next to her.

“Oh, shit!” someone outside shouted. “It’s Jared and Tate!”

But my eyes were on her.

She watched the stoplight, glancing anxiously at me and biting away the smile from her bottom lip. I could tell her leg was bouncing up and down, because her shoulders and head looked like they were vibrating.

“Jax,” I said, breathing hard. “You still in good with the cops?”

“Yeah,” he answered in a hesitant tone. “Why?”

“Because.” And I looked up at the traffic cam perched on top of the stoplight, and glancing left to right and seeing no immediate cars, slammed my back into the seat and gassed it, speeding through the red light.

“Motherfu—!” I heard Tate’s curse, but her voice trailed off as I sped away.

Madoc tipped his head back, busting up with laughter, while Jax snorted close to my ear.

People outside cheered, howling and laughing. I glanced in my rearview mirror to see Tate, inching through the stoplight, following my lead, and then taking off when she realized it was safe.

I shifted into fourth and then fifth—the hot summer sun was nothing compared to the lava raging under my skin.

God, I fucking loved her.

Even being on the track—which I loved—wasn’t as good as the high I felt when she was near me.

“Jared,” Jax warned. “Slow down.”

I looked ahead, a smile teasing my jaw.

“Jared,” he said again, his voice harder.

I ignored him, shifting my eyes from left to right, looking for danger as I approached the next stoplight.

“Jared!” Madoc shouted, and I punched into sixth, my heart racing and my breathing hitching painfully in my chest.

“Oh, shit!” Jax howled, and we all held our breaths as the light just turned to green, and I flew through the intersection without slowing down.

And then I let out a breath, safely getting to the other side.

“Oh, thank God,” Madoc gasped and then looked at me. “You’re such an asshole.”

I sucked in air. “What?” I acted innocent. “It was green.”

Tate gained on my ass, but then I saw her skid into a left turn behind me.

“What?” I said more to myself than to the guys, watching her in my rearview mirror.

“She’s cutting through the school,” Jax guessed, looking out the window behind him.

“Shit,” I hissed, remembering the gates were open for Sunday track practices. She could drive into the front parking lot, go around the side of the school, and out the back gate with almost no traffic or interruption.

“You didn’t say what path to take home,” Madoc pointed out.

Yeah, I know. Why didn’t I think of that?

I rounded the square, cutting into a side street and racing through the less busy area where smaller businesses were closed on Sundays.

I kept up on the gas, my nerves firing with the need to go. I didn’t care

about winning.

Winners usually don't.

I wanted this, right here, right now, with her. I needed to see her. It was frustrating not knowing where she was.

Rounding two more corners and inching through a stop sign, I sped around the corner to Fall Away Lane just as she was rounding the corner from the other end.

“Go!” Madoc shouted, and I was about ready to punch him. What did he think I was doing?

Full speed ahead on the empty street, we both raced forward, and I screeched to a halt at the curb, followed by Tate not half a second later, the loud scream of our tires filling the whole neighborhood.

“Yes!” Madoc shouted, howling out the window. “Woo-hoo!”

I let my head fall back, my chest expelling every ounce of breath I'd been holding. Jax patted me on the shoulder, squeezing tight once, and climbed out of the car after Madoc.

Tate and the rest of the girls climbed out of the G8, smiling and laughing as Madoc and Jax wrapped their arms around them for a kiss.

Rubbing my hand down my face, feeling the thin layer of sweat, I climbed out of Jax's car and looked over at Tate, her arms crossed as she leaned on the hood and peered over at me.

Her chest rose and fell—she was still catching her breath—and the heat in her eyes was . . .

Jesus.

I took in a deep breath, knowing what she wanted. Knowing everything she still held hostage in her brain and heart that she wouldn't let past her lips. She was still that innocent and timid girl who let me put my hands on her in the chem lab four years ago, but with the armor of a woman who still didn't want to trust. Not that she trusted me completely four years ago, either.

I gave her a half smile, telling her everything with my eyes that she already knew.

Nothing had changed. Especially not our foreplay.

“Do you need anything?” I asked my mom, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder as I fastened my belt. I'd just gotten out of the shower, while Jax,

Juliet, Madoc, and Fallon took Pasha and joined some friends at Mario's for dinner.

Tate stayed home to work through her reading list, and I had e-mails, budgets, and a ton of little shit that Pasha had left me to look over, which I'd finished just before I jumped in the shower and my mom called to check in.

"Well, since you ask . . .," she hinted, sounding cheerful. "Jason has to miss my checkup tomorrow at the doctor. Would you like to go with me?"

I stilled. *She wanted me to do what?*

"To the gynecologist?" I cringed, grabbing my watch to put it back on.

I heard her snort. "He's an ob-gyn. Don't make it weird."

Taking the phone in hand, I dug out one of Jax's black T-shirts, since I still hadn't gone to claim my stuff left at Madoc's. "Um, well . . . I'd really rather not, but if you need me . . ."

I heard her quiet laugh on the other end. "You're precious."

I rolled my eyes, taking the phone away from my ear to slip on the shirt. "What time should I pick you up?"

"Noon," she shot back. "And thank you."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. I was trying to be nicer. I thought she'd earned it. But it was damn hard trying to change our relationship when we'd been the same way for so long. How do you go from not liking and not respecting someone to doing both?

It wasn't going to happen overnight. Not even close. And it felt like there would always be bad blood between us.

But Quinn Caruthers—my soon-to-be little sister—was going to have it all. No one would stand in her way, least of all me.

I'd bury any lingering resentment from my own childhood for her.

I walked to the window, zoning in on Tate sitting cross-legged on her bed with an array of books spread out before her.

Her tanned arms were half covered by her long hair spilling around her, and when she got up to do something with her iPod, I grunted under my breath, feeling my dick tighten and then swell.

"I gotta go," I told my mom. "See you tomorrow." And I hung up.

Gripping my phone at my side, I watched her for all of two seconds—fresh and beautiful and sweet and driving me fucking nuts—before I jogged down the stairs, texting as I went.

Come outside.

I grabbed my leather jacket and keys, dashing into the garage, hitting the opener.

I added Please just for good measure, and climbed on the motorcycle.

Turning the ignition, I backed out of the driveway and eased down in front of her house, unlatching the helmet secured to the side.

I knew she might resist, but much to my relief, the front door opened.

She stepped out, folding her arms over her chest, which I knew she did for modesty's sake. She was in her pajamas—shorts and a T-shirt—so she wasn't wearing a bra.

Looking confused, she walked down the brick walkway and cocked her head. "What are you doing?"

I held up the helmet, hopeful. "Nighttime ride?" I suggested. "Your favorite thing in the summertime."

Okay, not her absolute favorite thing, but close.

She looked at me like I was crazy. "I'm in my pajamas, Jared."

"And you'll stay in them," I shot back. "I promise."

She hooded her eyes, unamused by my joke, and I fought to hold back the grin.

Her red plaid pajama shorts were short and awesome, and the idea of her thighs, looking just as smooth and supple as ever, wrapped around my waist was a thrill I'd definitely let myself have right now. Any way I could get it.

She regarded me, the wheels in her head turning, but I didn't miss the flicker of temptation she sucked at hiding.

"Just a minute," she sighed, giving in and spinning around.

She dove inside the house, grabbing a hoodie located just inside the door and her black Chucks. She slipped on the hoodie, sweeping her hair out from underneath, and then sat down on the top steps to slip her shoes on, leaving them untied.

And the amount of sexual rage running through my goddamn body as she jogged down the steps, her long hair dancing in the light breeze and her smile shutting down my heart, made me real damn glad she wasn't sitting in front of me.

Instead, she climbed on behind me, and I handed her the helmet.

Her bare thighs rubbed against the outside of mine, and when she wrapped her arms around my waist, I closed my eyes, savoring the frustration.

"You ready?" I nearly choked on my words.

She snuggled in tight, grazing my ear with something—maybe her nose?

“You smell good,” she whispered, and I squeezed the handlebars.

Son of a . . .

She was doing this on purpose.

“I’m taking that as a yes,” I said, slipping on my helmet.

“You usually take what you want,” she retorted. “Don’t you?”

I shook my head as her chin lay to rest on my shoulder, determined not to walk into that one. We took off, flying down the street as her front leaned forward into my back and her arms tightened even more.

Taking a few turns, I steered us toward the long city streets where we could drive at a decent speed but not too fast. Cruising easily down the calm stretches of road, I felt her relax and lean into me more, her body moving in sync with mine when I weaved to change lanes or turn.

She felt beautiful. Just like always. My body was squeezed between her tight thighs, and she stayed close. Her head—or chin or cheek—never left my back, and we drove the deserted back roads and neighborhood streets just like we used to. Back when we realized how awful it was to be apart and how much we wanted to be together, no matter what we were doing. We simply had to be touching.

And after about a half hour, she remembered, too.

Her hands drifted underneath my jacket and skimmed my waist, her fingers slowly splaying out across my stomach.

I breathed harder as she rubbed my abs, dragging her fingernails across my skin, where every one of my muscles was on alert, thanks to her.

One of her hands moved down the inside of my thigh, and I felt a flutter in my chest.

She grazed my ear with her moist lips and breathed out my name. “Jared.”

I held my hands stiff on the handlebars, almost afraid I’d lose control.

I reached back, taking her thigh in my hand. That soft skin just above the knee teased me. Urging her closer, I strained for control, feeling the heat between her legs hug my back, and I took us back home before I gave in to temptation and pulled over in a back alley.

In front of my house, I took off my helmet and sat there, because her fucking hands hadn’t stopped, and it felt too damn good.

“I missed riding with you.” The warmth of her whisper coated my ear. “Not like at the race Friday night, but cruising like this. It’s like dancing, the way I move with your body.”

I turned my head, leaning into her mouth as she grazed my ear. “It is. The

kind of dancing I'm good at."

And I hissed when she reached around and took my cock in her hand, massaging it and making it painfully hard. It was trying to punch through my jeans.

"Fuck."

I squeezed her thigh and then gave in. Twisting my body, I slid one arm under her arms and gripped her thigh with the other, hauling her into the front to straddle me.

She didn't hesitate. Grabbing the back of my neck, she pulled me into her lips, and I fucking took her mouth with just as much force.

Jesus Christ.

Tate's kisses were like a game. She came in, moving quick as she licked and bit and massaged, then releasing me just early enough to jack me up and leave me hanging. She always teased, letting me taste her tongue as it licked mine, and then took everything away, and I was a damn junkie needing another fix.

And her body. Her tight stomach and perfect legs moving against me and on me were nothing compared to how she looked naked and moving the same way.

Gripping her ass in both hands, I jerked her into my cock, grinding her so she'd feel me even deep inside.

Then I leaned forward, pushing her back on the bike, desperate to slide my hand up her sweatshirt.

But I just sat there, pressing my forehead to hers as we both breathed hard. I knew she wanted it. I knew I fucking wanted it.

Except I was suddenly hit by where this would put us in the morning. We'd fuck, probably all night, and love every second of it. I knew she wouldn't say no if I took her inside right now, but . . .

"Do you want to come in?" she gasped, taking my face in her hands. "Jared, please."

I squeezed my eyes shut, my dick feeling like it was going to combust if it didn't get to her, but . . . damn . . .

I didn't want to just screw.

I wanted her to love me again. I wanted her to say she was mine.

And I didn't want to have to bully her about it, either.

Taking a deep breath, I sat up and shook my head. "No."

Her eyes went wide. "Excuse me?"

I heaved out a sigh, feeling like I'd rather chew tin foil than say no to her

again.

I took her hands and pulled her up. “Come on,” I urged, climbing off the bike. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

She looked absolutely stunned as she slid off the bike and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Are you serious?”

I almost laughed. She’d always been the one in control in the past, and this was certainly new for both of us.

I put my arm around her shoulder, walking up her walkway. “Take the week,” I told her. “Go to your job. Read your books. Take a great big swim in Lake You,” I teased, walking up her porch stairs. “And if, at the end of the week, you’re ready to give me this,” I turned her around and placed my hand on her heart, “then I’ll take this.” And I slid my hand between her legs, holding her pussy.

She jerked, her eyes rounding again as she stilled.

I leaned in, kissing her lips softly, and then made my way back over to Jax’s house before I had a chance to rethink my stupid decision.

Tate and I would fuck.

Hopefully tomorrow, when she was ready to admit that she wanted me back, but until then . . .

I wasn’t wasting days, weeks, or even months going round and round. I’d have her heart first.

Walking into the house, I noticed Jax, Juliet, Pasha, and Fallon curled up on the couch and carpet watching a movie, so I went into the kitchen to find Madoc, sitting at the table, making a sandwich.

I slowly lowered myself into a chair and leaned back, needing sleep and my best friend’s perspective.

“Are you okay?” he asked, loading his bread with mustard.

I shook my head. “No.”

I glanced at him, ready to do something I’d never done before, and confide in him. I wanted him to tell me she was okay. That I was good for her, and that I was everything she needed.

But his scared blue eyes were focused downward, and he inched back.

“Yeah, well,” he said warily, “your dick is hard, dude, and it’s kind of freaking me out. We’ll talk later.”

And he abruptly grabbed his plate and can of soda, getting up and leaving the kitchen.

I looked down to see, indeed, I was still completely jacked up from the

episode outside.

My chest shook with laughter. “You don’t like it?” I called after him.
“Freud said everyone was bisexual, right?”

“Yeah, fuck you,” he shot back.

I let my head fall back, laughing my ass off.

Chapter 13

Tate

A week.

He'd asked me to take the week, probably figuring I'd take a day, but in the end, he was right.

Go figure.

I needed the time, and I couldn't believe he was the one telling me we needed to slow down.

The next day I'd felt terrible about Ben. About trying to force something that I wanted but wasn't feeling.

After all, Ben was stable, predictable, and calm. Everything Jared wasn't. And I was tired of being a cliché.

Terminal good girl wants bad boy every time, right?

So I had tried changing my stripes, only to learn that it wasn't a question of bad boy versus good man. It was Jared versus every other guy on the planet, and having him near again reminded me of how awful life had been without him.

Plain and simple, I still loved him.

I realized this about the time I arrived at work on Monday morning. Then I spent the evening shopping with Juliet, and when I got home, he didn't call or knock on my door.

I definitely expected him to crawl through my window again that night, but when I woke on Tuesday morning, he wasn't there.

So I decided there was no need to rush things. Part of me still didn't trust him. He'd deserted me twice, and although I saw the proof that he'd grown up, there was no need to dive in headfirst every time.

I'd take the week, do my job and my reading, get my car ready for the weekend, and see what happened. I knew the ball was in my court, but also that I liked it when he pursued me. I always had.

But other than a few sideways glances, he'd left me alone.

When I got home yesterday, I saw him and Jax standing in the driveway

with a couple of other guys and Jared's Ford Mustang Boss 302. The same car he'd had in high school, and the same one I'd spent countless hours in and done countless things with him in.

I didn't know if they were his friends or coworkers of some sort, but they'd clearly brought his car to him. There was another car in the driveway as well, but this morning when I left for work, it was gone. I figured whoever brought the car must've left.

So Jared had wanted his Boss here. I wondered why.

I sat up, grabbing the water bottle and spraying my face, little specks tickling my skin. Juliet was lying on the lawn chair next to me, on her stomach, with her face buried in her phone, while Fallon had gone inside to grab waters.

It was after seven on Friday night, and even though the sun was beyond the horizon, we were still lying out in my backyard, enjoying the remnants of heat and the drone of summer sounds. Lawn mowers, insects in the trees, air-conditioning units . . . and the buzz on my skin, attuned to every little sound of him next door. His music, his car engine . . .

"What are you doing?" I heard Fallon ask, and I turned to see her looking at Juliet, confused as she set the water bottles down on the little round table.

"What?" Juliet looked up at her.

Fallon sat back in the lawn chair, her emerald green bikini bringing out the color in her eyes.

"That's Jax's phone," she pointed out, catching Juliet red-handed.

I grinned, eyeing Juliet suspiciously just as much as Fallon.

Juliet thinned out her lips, thoughtful. "I heard there's this app where you track each other's phones. I'm trying to put it on his."

"Oh, my God." Fallon reached out and grabbed the phone out of Juliet's hands. "Jax has corrupted you. Are you really that worried?"

Juliet got up on all fours and turned around, sitting down. "You're telling me you're not the least bit concerned that our boyfriends—and then she pointed to Fallon—"and your husband are going to a strip club tonight?"

"No," Fallon shot back. "You know why? Because I know Madoc."

She plucked her sunglasses off the top of her head and slid them over her eyes, continuing, "As soon as he gets to the club, he's going to take a selfie or some shit and send it to me to brag." The casual grin on her lips spread wider. "Twenty minutes after that he's going to text, telling me he wishes I was up onstage dancing for him. And about an hour later, he's going to barge through our door, horny as a teenage boy, and wanting who?" She placed a palm on her

chest. “Me. And I won’t be home, because we’re going out, and he’ll be frantic, wondering where the hell I am.”

I snorted, covering up my own concern. Jared wasn’t my boyfriend. Yet, while I wasn’t as worried as Juliet was, I wasn’t as calm as Fallon, either.

I cleared my throat, adjusting the tie of my black bikini at the back of my neck. “Juliet, you know better,” I soothed. “It’s Zack’s bachelor party, so cut the guys some slack. Jax won’t look twice at those girls, much less do anything with them.”

Her lips pursed, and I looked above her, seeing Jax appear at the window, drying his hair with a towel.

He couldn’t keep his eyes off her. Especially in her red suit.

“All that will happen,” I continued, seeing him smirk and walk away, “is he’ll get worked up thinking about the hot mischief he’s going to get up to with you when he gets home. You won’t get any sleep tonight.”

“And Jared?” she retorted, changing the subject.

“What about him?”

“He’s the only one unattached,” she pointed out. “When the strippers get him all worked up—which they will, because he’s only human—who’s he going to come home to?”

I shot her a pointed look, wondering why she was baiting me. I was about to shoot the spray bottle in her face, but Fallon saved me the trouble. She threw a rolled-up towel at Juliet’s head, at which Juliet threw one back, and they both started laughing.

After another hour, we’d cleaned up the backyard and made some dinner—since the guys were getting food with Zack before heading to the club—and then we parked ourselves outside on the front porch to eat. Juliet still wore her red bikini with a cutoff jean skirt. Fallon had on a pair of white shorts, and I had slipped on a sheer white cover-up.

“Oh, my God.”

I looked up, seeing that Juliet had dropped her fork and was staring across the porch, into the distance. She darted her gaze down, glancing to where the fork had dropped by her feet, but then forgot it, shooting her eyes back up.

I followed her line of sight, and my jaw tightened with a smile.

Jax had stepped out of the house, looking a lot different, and Juliet was breathless.

He wore black suit pants and a black jacket with a white dress shirt, open at the collar. His height, due to his long legs, made his appearance all the more

forbidding and—I had to admit—pretty damn hot. His black hair, close to the scalp on the sides and longer on top, was styled in sporadic wisps that were pushed to the front. With his shoes, his shiny watch, his gleaming belt buckle—Jax looked sleek and powerful.

I looked over at his girlfriend, rolling my eyes at the sight of her slightly open mouth as she gaped.

“He’s not a piece of meat,” I teased.

She blinked, coming back to her senses and then slowly rose, walking to the railing.

“Oh, my God.”

I turned, hearing Fallon’s voice this time.

Just like Juliet, she was staring at Madoc—who’d just exited the house, as well—like she was actually in pain.

“He’s such a yuppie.” She gave him a wistful look. “But he’s so damn cute.”

I barked out a laugh.

Madoc was also dressed in black suit pants and a black jacket, but he wore a gray shirt with a silver necktie. Madoc looked great in ties. They fit his style and his broad chest, and the fact that he took care with his clothing choices, always making sure that everything he wore was a perfect fit, only amplified the fact that Madoc being preppy did nothing to quell how hot he got his alternative-styled wife.

Fallon stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. “Yeah, baby!”

Juliet joined in, whistling at her man as they both leaned over the railing.

“You guys are idiots,” I teased again, standing up to pick up the fork.

They both started laughing, and both men shook their heads, smiling as they headed over.

I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the house, watching the girls swing their legs over the railing and sit.

But then my face fell. My stomach dropped, and my breath cut off, and *holy shit*.

Jared had walked out of the house, locking the door behind him, and I looked away, but I couldn’t resist.

Glancing back up for another look, I watched him out of the corner of my eye, staring off out to the street as he fastened a cuff link.

A cuff link?

He was wearing cuff links. I finally blinked, my heart beginning to

jackhammer with increasing speed.

Jared in a suit made my mouth water. I loved him in his jeans or casual black pants and T-shirts, but when he cleaned up?

Oh, my God.

His black pants draped down his legs, falling just casually enough to look like he didn't care, but his pressed shirt and jacket—both a deep, rich black—didn't hide his body at all. I caught sight of a sliver of his collarbone, since his top button was undone, and then he slipped a casual hand into his pocket and looked over, locking eyes with me.

I turned away.

“What are you ladies going to do tonight?” Madoc picked Fallon off the railing and held her close to his chest.

“Hang out,” she chirped. “Make some popcorn.”

“Right,” Jax shot back, coming to stand between Juliet's thighs as she sat on the railing.

Jared made his way over, pulling out his car keys.

Madoc was kissing and whispering to Fallon. Jax was looking up at Juliet, trying to sweeten her up as she shied away from him, playing jealous.

And Jared stood aloof, ignoring me. I didn't know if he was looking at me, and I didn't know if he was mad that I hadn't reached out, but I still felt his presence on every inch of my body.

He tugged at me like a magnet.

Jax pulled Juliet down, kissing her nose and then her lips. “I love you,” he said, and my gaze flashed to Jared, locking eyes with his.

“I'll be home by midnight,” I heard Jax say, but Jared continued to hold me. The heat was unmistakable. But what scared me was how I also saw the coldness.

A wave of *déjà vu* hit me, and it was like I was back in high school for a moment.

“If you're one second late,” Juliet scolded Jax, “I'll have a tantrum.”

“I love your tantrums,” he flirted, pulling her hips into his.

“I mean it,” she emphasized, trying to sound tough, but I knew it was just a game they played. “I will make you bleed if you're late.”

“Promise?” he taunted, diving in for another kiss.

I shook my head, keeping my gaze off Jared.

“Jax, let's go.” Madoc pulled Jax by the neck, leading him away from his girlfriend.

All three guys walked to Jared's car, every inch of their well-dressed, manicured looks emphasizing that they were men now. It was still hard to wrap my head around it at times, since I'd grown up with Jared and met Madoc and Jax as teens. I'd seen them all—more often than not—in jeans and T-shirts. I'd seen them do the dumbest things and even joined in a few times.

But those boys were gone.

"Jared!" Fallon shouted as Jared opened his driver's side door. "Get them home safe!"

He arched a brow, giving her a condescending look. "They'll be home before I will," he said, looking over at me. "I don't have a curfew."

My eyes stung with sudden anger as I watched him climb into his car without another word.

He started the car and backed out of the driveway, not sparing a glance back.

Asshole.

Oh, sure. Go have fun. No one's waiting at home for you. If you don't have me, you'll just go play with a random girl, because why not, right?

I clenched my fists and let my head fall back.

Shit. I was being ridiculous.

Madoc and Jax were going to have fun with their friends. To celebrate. They'd come home just as much in love with Fallon and Juliet as ever.

And Jared was manipulating me. Just like he always did, and I fell for it. He was a grown man who still found it quite appetizing to take a great big bite out of my peace of mind. He expected me to give in and call or text to tell him how much I loved him. Or he expected me to come pick a fight tomorrow about something silly just so I could get a rise out of him. He wanted me mad, because he wanted to draw me out.

As the sound of Jared's engine left the neighborhood, I let the small smile spread across my lips.

He was so used to toying with me. It was like second nature. So why not react and give him what he wanted?

"Wicked is a dual strip club, right?" I asked the girls, already knowing the answer. "Female dancers downstairs and male dancers upstairs?"

Juliet glanced at Fallon, and then both of them looked at me.

As realization hit, Juliet gasped and Fallon threw her head back, laughing. And then we all shrieked, scrambling for my front door to get ready.

“Hi,” I greeted the stocky bouncer with the military buzz cut.

“Hello, ladies.” He looked us up and down, and I stopped, which caused Fallon to bump into me as she veered around into the club with Juliet.

“You let women sit downstairs, right?” I inquired. “If we decided to watch the female dancers later on, I mean.”

He raised his eyebrows, amused. “We love our female customers,” he played. “No matter what turns them on.”

I straightened. *Yeah, I didn't mean that really, but okay.*

Entering the club, I inhaled, not sure what to expect. Cigarettes and maybe the stench of stale liquor, but that wasn't what hit me as soon as I entered.

The scent of golden peaches and rich berries and lilies drifted through my nostrils, filling my lungs with their hint of vanilla and musk. The black and burgundy interior of the entryway was accented with gold fixtures and would probably seem gaudy elsewhere, but here, the less-is-more idea prevailed. It wasn't overwhelmingly busy. The carpets were lush, the walls were a warm but dark violet, and the décor possessed singular objects on which to focus your attention instead of too much to distract you.

We stepped through a doorframe without a door on it and immediately stopped, seeing the low ceiling give way, and the room before us damn near took my breath away.

“No wonder they dressed up,” I said under my breath. “This place . . .”

I'd only heard about Wicked. It was halfway between Shelburne Falls and Chicago and was a popular stopping point for men—and women—on their way home from work to the suburbs. It was reported to have great music, the best-looking dancers—which it would, since there were about four universities within an hour of here that had a lot of hardworking students needing good-paying jobs—and it also had a five-star chef.

The guys had to be paying a thousand dollars per table to throw this bachelor party.

A hostess in a tight black dress—much like my own—approached us with menus.

“Hello.” Her long, brown hair, bronze complexion, and dark eyes glimmered in the surrounding candlelight. “The ladies' show upstairs doesn't start again for another hour, but we can get you seated.”

I barely heard her, looking around for the guys. It was after ten, and while

they held only two performances with the male dancers on Friday and Saturday nights, the female dancers performed around the clock.

“Actually,” Fallon spoke up, “can we sit down here and have a drink first?”

What?

“Of course.” She smiled and nodded. “Follow me.”

I let out a sigh and followed, Juliet at my side, with her gaze darting everywhere, probably looking for Jax.

While my curiosity was all for getting a glimpse of the guys tonight, I didn’t want this to be about them. Madoc and Jax expected Fallon and Juliet to handle themselves with patience and understanding—which they did—but it would be a hell of a riot to see how they handled themselves when they found out their women were upstairs getting a show, too.

That was the point of coming here, after all.

“Ugh,” Fallon groaned as she halted and looked at the stage. “Look at her tits.”

I twisted my head, looking up onstage, and immediately I could feel my face falling.

Shit.

A beautiful blonde with lowlights in her hair wore a gold bikini that pushed up her breasts, making them stand out against her flat stomach and perfect skin. And as she held the pole with one hand and leaned back, rolling her hips and bringing the back of her hand up to flip her hair, my gut twisted.

I didn’t want Jared to see her. She looked like me, only better.

“I thought you weren’t worried,” Juliet said to Fallon.

Fallon shook her head, still watching the dancer. “Don’t serve me that shit now. You have great boobs.”

Juliet grinned, following the hostess. “Madoc likes yours,” she reassured Fallon. “Come on.”

The hostess sat us down in a semicircle booth of burgundy velvet with a black table and drapery tied back on both sides. A dim lamp hung from overhead, flickering to look like a candle.

“There’s no table fee?” I asked, sliding into the booth.

“Not for you three.” She winked, handing out drink menus. “Lap dances are fifty bucks, though. Enjoy.”

I snorted. Yeah, because we definitely wanted lap dances.

“How do we even know they’re here yet?” Juliet asked, looking at both of us.

“They’re here.” Fallon smirked, flashing her phone and showing the selfie Madoc must have taken just outside the club. “He sent this twenty minutes ago.”

One by one, we all let our eyes drift to the sea of customers out and about in the club, looking for the bachelor party, when I knew we shouldn’t. The guys should be left alone. Until later, when we let it slip via text or social media that we were upstairs getting our own eyeful.

It took me about two seconds to locate them.

Jared and a team of other guys sat right in front of the stage, off to the right. Zack, Madoc, Jax, their high school friend Sam, with about half a dozen other guys I barely knew, were surrounded by about three smaller tables as they sat back in cushioned chairs with drinks in hand. Jax took a bottle and poured a few shots, handing one to Jared and Madoc, at which Jared tipped his head back, downing the shot. I inhaled an excited breath.

Burying my face in the menu, I mumbled to the girls, “Around the stage. With the girl dressed like a Native American giving Zack a lap dance.”

They dove back behind the curtain, and Juliet huddled close to Fallon as they both spied on the guys.

I laughed under my breath.

“Good evening,” a server greeted us, stopping at our table. “Would all of you like something to drink?” she asked, setting down napkins.

“Three shots of Jim Beam,” Fallon ordered. “Devil’s Cut.”

“I don’t want whiskey,” Juliet retorted.

“Good, because they’re all for me,” Fallon shot back, and I was amused at her nerves. She was always so confident and tough, but my girl did not like her man in a strip club after all.

I set the menu down, pushing all three of them toward the server.

“Pineapple and Parrot Bay for her,” I ordered, pointing to Juliet, “her three shots and a Newcastle”—I pointed to Fallon—“and I’ll have a Red Stripe.”

The server nodded without writing anything down and left, and everyone looked back out to the guys. Aside from sporadic glances to the stage to watch the dancers, they mostly just sat back and joked around. Jared sat facing the stage, but his head was turned to the side, and I could tell he was laughing from time to time by how his shoulders shook. A server brought appetizers, and while some of the guys dug in, others continued to just drink.

The show had a main performance—a dancer on center stage—but there were smaller stages spread out with a couple of pole dancers.

Juliet sat back, looking calmer. “They’re behaving.” She gave a sad smile.

“Now I feel bad. We should just go upstairs.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t want to be down here anyway.”

Fallon shot her eyes over to me. “Really? You’re not jealous? At all?”

I looked away, running a nervous hand through my straightened hair and bringing it over the front of my shoulder. “Jared is none of my business,” I maintained.

“Are you sure about that?” Juliet asked timidly as she stared out to the stage, her body gone eerily still.

“Yes,” I retorted. “Let him have his fun.”

“Okay.” She nodded, sounding forlorn. “Because he seems to like what he’s seeing up onstage.” And then she pinned me, looking serious.

My eyebrows nosedived, and I immediately looked out to where Jared sat. He was still sitting back in his chair, but his full attention was onstage, and when I followed his gaze, I nearly choked on a breath.

My neck heated, and my head was screaming.

Piper.

Jared’s ex. The girl he was sleeping with before we got together in high school.

My tight black dress constricted my body more, and I felt sick.

I hadn’t seen her in four years. Why was he looking at her?

She had made and distributed a sex video of Jared and me in school, and he was sitting there, giving her his attention like he was actually turned on.

I stayed still, paralyzed not by her, but by him. He should’ve turned away. He should’ve left.

After what she did to us . . .

She stood on a smaller side stage with the pole at her back as she bent down at the waist and then flipped her hair back, giving Jared a close and personal view of her tits.

She then rose, put one hand behind her neck and the other behind her back and tugged smoothly at the strings of her top, letting it fall away from her body to expose her tanned and perfect breasts to him.

I looked down, grinding my teeth.

No.

My face ached as tears sprang to my eyes, and I looked away, so Fallon and Juliet wouldn’t see.

Fuck him.

By the way he was watching her—making no move to ignore her—and by

the way she singled him out, they could have each other.

I dragged in a deep breath and cleared my throat.

Digging in my clutch purse, I pulled out a bill just as the server brought us our drinks.

I tipped my chin up, blinking away the tears in my eyes. "I want to buy a lap dance," I told her, holding out the money. "Not for me, though."

She tucked the tray under her arm and took the money. "Sure. What do you need?"

I leaned on the table, noticing that Jared had finally looked away, before I started speaking to the server again. "Do you see that guy with the brown hair over there dressed all in black? He's lifting a glass to his lips right now." I pointed in his direction, and the server turned to see who I was referring to.

She nodded.

"Can you send him that dancer that's onstage in front of his table when she's done?" I asked and felt Juliet stiffen next to me.

The server smiled. "Of course."

She left, and I closed up my purse, setting it on my seat next to my lap as I ignored Fallon and Juliet, who I knew were staring at me.

"Tate, what are you doing?" Juliet's concerned voice was void of her usual pep.

"Tate, stop her," Fallon urged, referring to the server. "Don't do this. You're setting him up."

I didn't know if Madoc had told Fallon anything about the episode with Piper in high school, but regardless, she knew buying Jared a lap dance was a bad move.

Kind of evil, actually.

I stared ahead, fisting the cold brown bottle in front of me.

I didn't know why I did it. It felt like those times when you want to ask questions or feel you should, but in the end, you don't really want the answers.

I didn't want Jared with other women. I loved him.

But I wanted a reason not to. I wanted one thing to push me off the fence. One thing that would make me never trust him again.

"You want him to fail you." Fallon's quiet voice was raspy, and I looked up to see her eyes pooling behind her glasses.

Then I glanced at Juliet looking at me like she didn't even know me.

"No," I whispered more to myself, shame warming my face. "I want it to hurt."

I knew I always forgot the pain he caused too easily. Not anymore.

Juliet narrowed her confused eyes on me, not understanding. Not understanding that the pain made me stronger. That anger felt good, and if Jared hurt me, then I could feed off it to feel superior.

I could win and not be the one left crying or waiting or trying to live and put up a front when the hole he left wouldn't fill.

"Son of a bitch."

I heard Fallon's curse and looked up, evening out my expression.

Piper had strolled out of the back area behind the stage and was walking through the tables, catching the glances of interested men as she passed by.

She was still beautiful. Complete with the perfect posture of confidence that hadn't dulled, even though her reputation had been ruined after the video.

Her deep brown hair, longer than I remembered, spilled in waves to the middle of her back, and her body shone like the sun on water.

She wore a white jeweled bikini top with a thong, but she did have a gold fishnet wrap around her ass, tied at her hips. However, her behind was almost completely visible through the array of squares in the netting, which made the wrap for show only.

Her eyes were on Jared as she sauntered over, a coy look on her face. For all she knew, he was still angry about the video, but that didn't seem to dull her confidence.

Standing over him, she slowly leaned down, placing her hands on his armrests, and I saw him look up at her and grow still.

She was talking to him, and he was letting her.

My mouth went dry.

Her back arched as she spoke, her leg bent up, and I could tell she was doing her best to get him to notice her breasts as she inched closer to his face.

I couldn't see Madoc or Jax. I couldn't see Fallon or Juliet anymore.

I could only see him drop his eyes, looking like he was struggling with what to do.

Maybe he really wanted it.

They were together once, after all. He'd enjoyed sex with her enough to go back for more. Four years had passed, he had returned to Shelburne Falls, and I still hadn't given him my heart. Maybe he was considering it.

I would never find out, right?

Do it.

The back of my eyes burned, and my heart raced, and I wanted him to touch

her. Piper would be an unforgiveable betrayal after what she'd done to me, and the pain would be extreme. My heart would get hard, just like after he'd left, and I'd be steel again.

But his angry jaw flexed like he was pissed or something, and for a moment I thought he wouldn't, but . . .

"Oh, my God." Fallon looked away.

Juliet looked down.

And I breathed like the room was running out of oxygen.

We all watched as he stood up and she took his hand, leading him through a back doorway to the private VIP rooms.

I slowly shook my head, watching him disappear with her. He could get a lap dance out here. Why was she taking him somewhere private?

Taking a slow sip of my beer, I straightened my back, refusing to let them see how I felt like someone had torn out my heart and stuck a knife in it.

I wanted to go home.

I wanted to go to bed and get up and read in the morning and get ready for my race and walk away from him as if he'd never mattered.

But instead I crumbled.

I gasped, dropping my head and shaking as I started crying. The tears spilled down, and I couldn't breathe.

Oh, God, why couldn't I breathe?

I pushed on my chest over my heart, willing it to stop trying to beat through my skin.

"Tate," Juliet cried, grabbing me and wrapping her arms around me. "Tate, don't."

She buried her head in my neck, gripping me tight, and I couldn't stand it. The cries suddenly lodged in my throat, and I needed air.

I shrugged her off and scooted out of the other side of the booth. "Just give me a minute." And I ran for the bathrooms, through the same doorway where Jared and Piper had disappeared.

But as soon as I entered the darkened hallway, a hand clamped over my mouth, and I tried to scream. I twisted and struggled as an arm wrapped around my waist and hauled me up, carrying me through another door.

No!

My heels dropped off my feet as my legs thrashed above the ground, and I heard the door slam shut as I tried to bite and struggle away, but he had me too tight.

The hard body at my back swung us around and walked me into the closed door, his breath at my ear.

“You kill me,” he said, and the shaky breath sounded like he was almost crying.

Jared.

I stilled, sucking in short breaths through his fingers as he set me down.

His threatening whisper was filled with pain. “You really do kill me, Tate.”

He wasn’t with Piper. I had barely seen the dimly lit room when he’d walked me in here, but I had noticed seating and a table.

But no Piper.

He’d been expecting me. He’d known I was here.

He tightened his arm around my waist, and I didn’t move except for my hands shaking. I was afraid of him. He felt enraged, and I hadn’t seen him like this since the night I shut down one of his parties senior year by turning off his electricity.

“I knew the minute you walked into the club,” he growled in my ear. “I was amused. I actually thought you were jealous.”

His mouth went to my hair as he inhaled shallow breaths, clearly angry and about to lose control.

“I loved you watching me,” he said. “But then you had to pull this shit.” His voice grew hard. “She comes over saying someone bought me a lap dance, and I knew right away it was you. You really think I’m nothing, don’t you? You thought I’d want her?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t think that—”

“Then why test me?!” he yelled, cutting me off and slamming his fist into the door ahead of me, making me jump.

He let me go, and I spun around, seeing his chest rise and fall hard—and the whole time he looked at me like I’d betrayed him.

Guilt dug at my insides, and I couldn’t even look at him. I was low, and I’d assumed the worst about him, and he was beyond hurt.

Before I’d always felt either on an even keel with Jared or that I was above him. Better in some way than the guy who had bullied me for so long.

But right now, he was too good for me.

I didn’t know where Piper was, but he wasn’t with her, and that was all that mattered.

When he looked down on me, the disdain and disappointment in his eyes closed in on me like a grave.

Veering around, he grabbed the door handle, and I shot out, wrapping my arms around his chest and burying my face in his back.

“Jared, please don’t go.” My voice shook, and his body froze. “Please?” I begged. “I didn’t think you’d do anything with her,” I whispered, keeping my forehead on his back. “I wanted you to, though. I wanted it to hurt.”

He stayed still, listening to me in the quiet room.

“It’s easier to be angry and pass judgment than it is to take a chance. It feels stronger.”

I felt his chest inflate with a breath. “Yeah, I know that feeling.”

I laid the side of my face on his back, hugging him close. “Nothing feels right without you. Not school or home,” I cried. “Everything is just giving me enough air to get to the next day without you. I never stopped being yours.”

He dropped his head back, letting out a sigh.

I swallowed, taking my chance. “I love you, Jared. I’ve always loved you, and I will always love you.”

There was no one but him, and even when he wasn’t around, he was. I would never be free of him—because I didn’t want to be.

Chapter 14

Jared

I lowered my head, the stress that had built up in my nerves slowly ebbing away. I couldn't believe she'd finally just said it.

All the nights. All the time and the phone calls and texts I'd sent . . . Every day, it had seemed as if she was moving farther away from me, and the memories of her were only dreams that had never been real.

Tatum Brandt loved me, and I was never letting her go again.

"I know what I want," she said, her voice thick with unshed tears. "I know where I'm going. I know what I stand for, and I don't do things that I don't want to do." She turned me around, her eyes holding me still. "And even so, without you in my life, I'm not happy. For better or worse, you've been my other half since I was ten years old, and I can't imagine a future I'd want without you in it. You're the love of my life."

Looking down at her, seeing the stormy expression in her eyes fill with expectation and nervousness—what would I do or say?—there was only one way to carry on. One way to move on.

There were no more words. Nothing to discuss and nothing to resolve. Every inch of me was hers, and I was sick of living without her for another second.

"Do you still love me?" she prompted quietly when I didn't say anything.

I looked away, licking my dry lips as I knelt down, picking up her heels off the floor. Sitting up on one knee, I wrapped my hand around her slender ankle and helped her foot into her shoe, one following the other.

"Jared, say something," she begged, the worry making her voice grow thick.

But I didn't.

Let her sweat a bit. I was so sick of talking.

I just wanted my girl.

Standing up, I took her hand and pulled her through the door, heading back

out into the club. She missed a step but caught herself, and picked up her pace to keep up with me.

The music danced around us, and I glanced at Tate's booth, seeing that Madoc had found Fallon and was hugging her back with his lips on her neck. Juliet was near the stage, sitting on Jax's lap, watching a dancer as he kissed her shoulder.

Good. They had rides home, then.

"Where are we going?" Tate sounded worried. "Are you still mad or something?"

I smiled to myself, leading her out of the club. Digging out my keys, I hit the button to unlock the car as soon as we hit the parking lot and moved swiftly, opening up the door for her.

"Get in," I told her. She blinked, looking confused, but got in the car, swinging her legs in so I could close the door.

Moving around the rear, I opened my door and immediately sat down and turned my head to look at her.

"Jared." She shook her head. "Why won't you talk to me?"

I reached over, lifting her underneath her arms, and slid her body over to sit sideways on my lap, her legs lying over the console.

Her back rested against my door, and her face, inches from mine, turned wide-eyed to me.

I reached up, cupping the side of her face. "Can we just skip to the end?" I asked softly. "I'm tired of missing you, Tate."

And that was it. No more talking, no more arguing, no more denying what couldn't be changed . . . I only lived in her orbit, and I would die there, too. There was no choice to be made.

I brought my hand up, threading my fingers through her hair and holding the back of her head as I hovered my lips over hers.

"I love you," I whispered and pulled her in, my mouth sinking into hers as her shocked whimper vibrated across my tongue.

Her sweet smell filled my nostrils as I sucked her tongue into my mouth and barely let her up for air.

I loved playing with her. I held her tight, so I could do whatever the hell I wanted. For three years in high school, I'd denied myself what I wanted, and for the last two years, she'd kept me from reclaiming what I wanted, and my peace of mind was fried.

By the time I was satisfied, she wouldn't be able to walk.

I moved over her mouth, sinking my teeth into her bottom lip and dragging it out and then diving back in again to play with her tongue.

She whimpered again but didn't even try to resist me as I controlled the kiss. My lips hummed with the feel of her, but before I could slide my hands anywhere I wasn't going to want to let go of, I pulled away, sucking in a breath.

Her chest rose and fell hard, but she opened her mouth again, coming at me for more.

I pulled back, shaking my head, and she searched my eyes, looking pained.

Before she could protest, I started the car, sliding my hand under her arched knees to shift.

Although it was hard to drive, I wasn't moving her. I doubted I'd let her away from me for a very long time.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I jumped onto the highway, feeling her settle into my lap and turn her tears into an excited little breath as I sped down the road. I still had my left hand behind her back and in her hair, so I was shifting and steering with my right.

And the whole time I was trying to keep my lead foot light on the gas, because I was dying to get home and inside of her. My cock was painfully restricted as it tried to grow but couldn't. It was already swelling as if it knew the feel of her thighs less than an inch away, and her wet tongue licking her lips right now.

She nuzzled her nose into my neck and held my head with her hand as she sucked in a breath. And then I let out a groan, damn near shutting my eyes as she nibbled under my ear.

"Tate," I breathed out, reaching down to adjust my swelling dick. *Fuck.*

Damn, she knew what she was doing. Her tongue darted out, so softly, licking and then kissing my neck and then trailing kisses across my cheek, and eating me up like I was a damn dessert.

I breathed in and out, punching the shifter down into sixth as the trees loomed on both sides of the dark night. We were in the middle of nowhere and wouldn't be home for another half hour.

"Jared," she whispered in my ear. "Please."

And before I knew it she'd reached behind her neck and unclasped the neck tie, letting the top of her little black dress fall to her waist, exposing her breasts.

My eyes flared, fucking hating her for a split second as I darted my gaze to her breasts, and I couldn't touch her, because my damn hand was driving the damn car.

I jerked the steering wheel right, and then seeing that I veered, I let out a frustrated growl. “Baby, please,” I begged.

She dove into my neck again, teasing, “You always liked my tits,” she taunted.

The blood in my dick raced, and I winced as it tried to stretch under my pants.

“I can feel you,” she said, nudging my hard-on with her ass. “And you feel you so good.”

Jesus, Tate. Stop. Please stop. I wanted her in a bed.

Her nose rubbed against my cheek, and she looked up at me. “I don’t think I can wait until we get home.” Her eyes looked desperate. “Please,” she begged again.

I shook my head, letting out a sigh as I looked her in the eyes. “Two years, and you’re going to make me fuck you in a car, aren’t you?” I damn near pouted.

She smiled, and I shifted down, skidding into a right-hand turn onto a country road, because there was no way I was going to win.

Hell, I didn’t even want to anymore.

I barreled down the gravel road, still going nearly eighty miles an hour and not giving a shit that the rocks were kicking up under my tires and probably chipping the paint.

Tate was devouring my neck, and my goddamn hands could barely stay steady on the road.

“Baby, damn,” I gasped, taking her lips and kissing the shit out of her as I tried to drive.

Veering to the right again, I flew onto Tanner Path, which was nothing but a small road—barely big enough for one car—that lined one of the little inlet ponds that served as runoff from the river. Sinking far enough into the darkness, where no car would venture this time of night, I slowed to a halt, the grind of the gravel music to my ears.

Setting the parking brake, I shot the seat back for legroom while she kicked off her shoes and swung a leg over my thighs, straddling me.

Her eyes spilled fire, looking like a starving animal before she grabbed my shirt between the buttons, ripping it open.

“Damn,” I growled through my teeth, reaching behind her back and ripping her dress in two as well, tearing the scraps away from her body.

Grabbing her hair at the back of her head, I pulled her neck back and took a handful of her ass in my other hand before taking her nipple in my mouth.

She gasped, her body shaking with shock, and I felt high as she slowly melted. She grinded on me, in nothing but her black lace G-string, and I couldn't believe how painfully turned on I was. My dick was fucking begging for her warmth.

I bit and sucked, trailing my hands all over her, squeezing and yanking her hips.

"Now," she whimpered, squirming against my cock and digging her nails into my bare chest. "Jared, now."

I opened the driver's side door, giving myself more room as I set my leg outside and reclined the seat back just an inch.

"You still on the pill?" I breathed hard, unfastening my belt.

She nodded frantically, leaning down to kiss and nibble my chest.

I freed my cock, grabbing her ass and pushing her up over it. She sucked in a shaky breath, and I took the delicate fabric of her G-string in my fist and leaned into her forehead. "Your pussy will feel my tongue tonight," I growled, "but for now . . ." I yanked, tearing the material away from her body, the pathetic threads disappearing in the black interior of the car.

She wrapped her smooth fingers around my dick, which stood as stiff as a flagpole, and positioned it underneath her, working me into her tight body. My jaw dropped open with my gasp as I crowned her.

Looking into her eyes, her full, beautiful breasts begging for my attention, I punched my hips up and sheathed my cock so deep inside her that she screamed, hitting the roof with her hand as she moaned and took in breath after quick breath.

"Jared!"

I held her hips, my body tense and tight as I closed my eyes and sank in to the hilt.

My cock throbbed inside her, and slivers of pleasure shot from my stomach and thighs, all leading inward to my groin.

Fuck, she was tight.

I took her ass in my hands and rocked her into me, my lips layered with hers. "Fuck me, Tate," I breathed out, begging against her mouth. "Fuck me like you hate me."

She pulled her hips back, and then slammed into me again, throwing her head back with a moan.

"Yes," I growled.

Her back was pressed against the steering wheel, and I dived down, sucking

a nipple into my mouth as she fucked me.

Her hips rolled into me, grinding her wet heat into my body so I felt every tight inch of her. She moved up and down my cock, faster and faster, back and forth, her hips rolling forward and backward, forward and then backward again, and I held her sweet body, already glistening with sweat as she rode me like I was her fucking toy.

She leaned back, flashing me a grin before she ripped my shirt and jacket wide, bringing them both down my arms.

“Get it off,” she ordered.

I whipped the jacket and shirt away, my fucking dick throbbing a mile a minute inside her as I tossed my shit I don’t know where. She reached down, reclining the seat all the way and hooking her thigh over mine, hanging it out the open door.

And she rode me hard. Her hand fisted the seat belt strap on the side of the door, while her other hand gripped my chest, and I held her hips, watching her look so beautiful it almost hurt.

“Oh, Christ,” I groaned, gripping one of her tits so hard I was probably bruising it. “Baby, your hips are like a fucking machine.”

Her head had fallen back, and I tensed every muscle in my chest and abs as I arched my head back, too. She was relentless, not breaking pace for a second.

“You don’t like it?” she asked, and I opened my eyes to see her face tilted up to the roof.

She gasped. “I’m sorry, baby,” she said breathlessly, smiling, “but love you or hate you, this is how I fuck you.”

And then she rose, coming down even harder on me, no longer rolling her hips but bouncing.

I squeezed my eyes shut, taking her attack. *Shit.*

Blood flooded my cock, but I didn’t want to come yet.

“Everything else may change, but never the way I love you,” I whispered, more to myself than to her.

Resuming old habits, when she wanted to come one way, and I wanted to have her another way, I found myself taking control to bring her over the edge. Arching my hips up, I thrust between her thighs, holding her hips tight and bringing her down, impaling her just as hard as she was sheathing me.

“Oh, God,” she moaned, and I leaned up closer to her, sucking on the flesh of her breast as I fucked her from the bottom. “I love when you do that.”

I smiled against her skin and lay back down, taking control, thrusting and

grinding, fucking her deep, and rubbing my thumb over her clit.

“Come on,” I urged, feeling her hair and her sweat graze my fingers on her back. “I want you spread for me on the hood, so I can taste how wet you are.”

“Yeah,” she breathed. “God, I love you, Jared.”

And she rode me faster, grinding more and more when my dick found the perfect spot, massaging her until her whole body tightened up and she started moaning.

“Jared,” she cried. “Oh . . .” Her hips fucked again and again and again, and she dug her nails into my chest, throwing her head back and coming all over me.

Her muscles tightened and squeezed around my cock as her orgasm moved through her, and I gripped her breast, every muscle in my body on fire from trying not to come.

Her hips stilled, and her breathing slowed as she dipped her forehead under my chin. “Again,” she begged. “Please.”

I took her mouth, kissing her hard. I ate up the taste of sweetness and sweat and wanted to promise her a thousand things I knew, without a doubt, I’d give her. No matter what I had to do, she was worth everything. Nothing and no one was ever as perfect as us together.

I sat up, holding her by the waist in order to lift her out of the car and around the door. She wrapped her legs limply around me and held on as I placed her on the hood, my cock sliding out of her.

She lay back, bringing her knees up and closing her legs.

But I shot out, grabbing her knees and spreading her thighs wide. “You just screwed me like an animal that couldn’t get enough,” I teased, loving the sight of her plump breasts ready and waiting. “Don’t get modest now.”

My pants hung loose at my waist, and I palmed my cock, not that I needed much help staying hard.

Leaning down, I pressed my tongue onto her wet clit and moved in quick circles, massaging her, because I knew exactly what she liked but was afraid to ask for.

Tate liked my tongue. She didn’t want fingers as much as that, and even though I was doing this to her—licking and flicking and fucking her with my mouth—I was doing this for me.

It was such a simple act, but nothing we ever did together was simple. It was a moment in an ocean of moments that kept us alive from one minute to the next, and it was heaven.

I had spent my life living and feeding off pain. The neglect brought on by

my mother's alcoholism, the blood spilled by my father, and the loss and loneliness I caused myself by denying what was as simple and necessary to me as breathing.

I ignored truth and reason, because it was easier to believe that my power defined me rather than admitting I needed anyone. Rather than admitting the reality.

That I loved Tate.

That she loved me.

And that together we were invincible.

It had taken me years to learn, but I'd spend the rest of my life making up for it.

I trailed my tongue up the sides of her body and then came down, sucking her into my mouth. She cried out and grabbed my hair, pulling me back as she sat up.

"Now." She yanked my hips in, wrapping her legs around me.

Taking her underneath her thighs, I slid her to the edge of the hood and thrust back inside of her, her moans traveling down my throat as we kissed.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I leaned my hand down on the hood as we stayed chest to chest.

I pumped hard and fast, two years' worth of desire to unleash as we made love on the hood of my car. Her head fell back as her cries filled the night air, and I thrust deep, eating up her lips and neck as she struggled for breath.

"Tate," I groaned, feeling the fire inside ready to explode. "I love you, baby."

And I unleashed, pushing so deep and hard that she bit my lip. I came, spilling inside of her, her body holding me hot and perfect.

I gasped, sweat trickling down my temples as I breathed against her shoulder. I released my fingers, realizing I'd been squeezing her hips, probably to the point of pain.

I heard her swallow. "Again," she demanded, and I let out a tired laugh.

It felt good that she was so needy. I couldn't get enough of her, either.

"At home." I leaned up and kissed her cheek and then her forehead. "I want a bed."

"Whose home?"

I kissed her nose. "Ours."

Chapter 15

Tate

Jared took my keys, unlocking the front door of my house—or his house, now that I knew he had put in an offer—and I was so thankful that it was dark outside.

My dress and underwear were in pieces somewhere in his car, and I wore only his suit coat, while he trailed into the house behind me in his black pants with his shirt hanging open, since I'd ripped off the buttons.

"I can't believe you bought the house," I said, folding my arms over my chest to keep the coat closed. The only time I wasn't modest was during sex.

"You didn't have to do that," I continued, keeping my voice gentle, even though I kept having to blink back the tears as I looked around my home.

"Don't start looking for something new to worry about." He closed and locked the door, coming up to wrap his arms around me. "You're going to Stanford," he stated, "and who the hell knows where we'll settle, but I just couldn't let the house go yet."

He looked around, a thoughtful expression on his face. I felt the same way. I wasn't ready to say good-bye, either.

"If we sell it later," he appeased me, "then it'll be our decision when we we're ready, but—"

I darted forward, cutting him off as I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed him tight. "Thank you," I choked out, tears lodged in my throat. "Thank you so much."

I knew he was worried about what I thought. Did this mean we were settling here after med school? Did this mean I wouldn't be able to entertain the possibility of practicing medicine elsewhere if an opportunity arose?

But I wasn't worried about that. He was just assuring me we didn't have to make any decisions yet. The house was ours to do with when we were ready, and we weren't losing it unless we wanted to.

My dad would get a new place with Miss Penley—Elizabeth—and while

I'd get used to it, I knew it would feel strange visiting him in a place I'd never lived in. Holidays might never feel the same way again.

Now—I looked around at the warm walls and shiny wooden floors—I'd always have the house I grew up in to keep my memories alive.

Our first Thanksgiving, when we'd invited Katherine and Jared over, and Jared ate my vegetables for me so long as I took his cranberry sauce, which he hated.

The hot summer day my dad chased us out of the house when Jared and I set out to prove that nothing was really nonflammable.

The mornings in junior high when he'd sneak back through the tree to his own room after having slept over, only to show up a half hour later to walk me to school.

I sighed into his neck, smiling. "I bought something for you, too," I said in a sweet voice.

"You did?" He sounded amused. "Today?"

I shook my head and leaned back, looking up at him. "About a year ago," I clarified. "I saw it and immediately knew I had to have it for you. I've been saving it ever since."

His sexy mouth curled into a smile, a curious look in his eyes. "I'm a hard guy to shop for," he warned.

I backed away. "Come up in five minutes." And I turned around, jogging up the stairs.

As soon as I entered my bedroom, I tossed his jacket on the chair in the corner and went into the bathroom to freshen up.

He'd made a mess of me. My hair was tangled, my body was sore, and I had red marks on my hips from his hands.

But I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it. Jared devoured me like food. No one loved me like he did, and I lived him. And loved him.

Jumping into the shower, I spent maybe fifteen seconds rinsing the sweat and sex off, before jumping back out and brushing through my hair.

Going to the top drawer of my chest, I reached into the back and pulled out the lingerie that I knew he never needed me to wear but would definitely love.

The black lacy top was a cross between a tank top and a corset—however, while traditional corsets laced in the back, this one laced in the front. I stepped into the matching G-string and slipped my arms into the top, lacing the long, black silk ribbon through the loops, so that they crisscrossed in the front, leaving the skin of my stomach exposed through the ribbon as it threaded upward to tie

between my breasts.

I'd always been embarrassed to try stuff like this. Jared was low maintenance, and he never gave the impression he wasn't perfectly happy with my pajama shorts and tank tops. And I had been intimate with Gavin so rarely that I never got around to experimenting with lingerie.

But Juliet inspired me. She and I had trailed into a shop one day, and then the very next day we had to go back, because Jax had destroyed the nightie she bought and gave her his credit card with instructions to replace the negligee and to buy some more as well.

I was jealous at the time. Her giddiness and happiness made me long to feel that again.

I glanced up, seeing a light fall across my floor, and I stepped over to the window, peeking through my sheer curtains to the house next door. Jax pulled down Juliet's dress to expose her naked back, and then he reached behind her to pull the curtains closed.

I smiled to myself, remembering the day almost two years ago that I'd had to tell them, "Hey, I can see everything. Would you mind . . . ?"

Since then, they'd been careful about making sure the window was closed—because they were loud, too—and the curtains drawn.

I was glad Juliet had her happily ever after, but I also knew it was past time for my own. Spinning around, I walked for the bedroom door, not wanting to waste another second of the five minutes I'd told him to wait.

"Tate, baby," a sleepy voice whispered against my hair. "Your phone."

Jared's arm tightened around my back and jostled me gently awake. I blinked my eyes open, realizing that my phone was ringing on the nightstand. I lifted my head off his chest and looked down at him, my dreamy cloud not lifting from my brain as I smiled at him.

His head lay to the side, facing the French doors, and his eyes were closed as he breathed peacefully.

Reluctantly turning away, I held the sheet up to cover my chest as I reached over to grab my phone.

"Hey, what's up?" I answered, seeing Juliet's name on the screen. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was only six thirty in the morning. Jared and I had been asleep for only a couple of hours.

“Sorry,” she shot out. “I saw Jared’s car over there, so I’m sure you’re . . .” She hesitated just long enough to make an innuendo. “Busy,” she finished.

A grin tugged at my jaw. “Nooooo,” I drawled out. “I was sleeping. What do you want?”

She cleared her throat. “I know you wanted to work out today, but I need to cancel. I’m drained this morning, okay?”

“No problem,” I sighed, twisting my head at the sound of thunder rolling outside. “I’m not going anywhere, either. Would you text Fallon to let her know?”

“Yeah, sure.” She yawned.

If it was going to rain, then it would be a bad day for an outdoor workout anyway.

“Are you okay?” I prompted, noticing that she sounded unusually tired for a morning person.

“Yeah,” she reassured me. “Just up too late. See you in a while.”

“All right, see you later,” I told her, shivers lighting up my skin as Jared’s hand trailed up the inside of my thigh.

“Bye.” And she hung up.

I put the phone back down and looked over, seeing Jared still half asleep, his wandering hand creeping farther up my leg.

Nuzzling back into his arms, I traced the lines of his jaw and lips with my eyes. Trailing my hand down his chest and farther to his abs, I took in the script tattoo on the side of his torso that he’d gotten when I was in France five years ago—*Yesterday Lasts Forever, Tomorrow Comes Never*—and the *Until You* he’d had Aura, his tattoo artist, add more than a year later when we finally got together senior year.

He’d added more tattoos since we’d been apart.

There were two feathers on the other side of his torso, one inscribed with *Trent* and the other inscribed with *Brothers*.

And looking up on his left pec, I raised myself up, struggling for shallow breaths as I read the script.

I exist as I am, that is enough.

Right there, my quote inscribed over his heart. Happy tears sprang to my eyes. I couldn’t believe it. He’d remembered the poem.

Lowering my head, I rested over his chest, promising myself that I’d never let him go.

His hand came up and started caressing my hair as he began to stir, and I

felt him brush against my leg, his arousal growing harder.

I leaned over the side of the bed, picking up my now useless lingerie, which had two hooks ripped off because he got impatient fiddling with the ribbons in his mad rush.

“I liked that stuff,” he mumbled, making me drop the lace. “Who knew I’d like you in clothes more than I liked you naked?”

I leaned up over him, shooting him an insulted look.

He barked out a laugh. “I didn’t mean that exactly,” he backtracked. “But it definitely enhanced your points of interest.”

I rolled my eyes and swung my leg over his body, straddling him as the thunder cracked through the sky.

I leaned down, whispering over his mouth. “Let me see what I can do to enhance your point of interest.”

And I snaked my way down his body, hearing him suck in a breath and grab my hair as I took him in my mouth.

Jared stood at the kitchen sink, looking even sexier doing dishes than he did when he worked on his car.

I’d made breakfast, and afterward he started cleaning up, just like he always did. As a kid Jared grew self-sufficient, and he was good about cleaning up, even when we had lived together for a couple of years in college. Thank goodness that hadn’t changed.

I joined him at the island and placed my dishes in the sink.

“Jax borrowed my cooler last month,” I told him, holding his hips from behind and kissing his back softly. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

We were off with a group of other drivers today for a nice cruise up to Chestnut Mountain for lunch. Even with the light drizzle outside, nothing was stopping me from making the trip. Jared with me in a car. And a long drive with music. In the rain.

A perfect day.

He twisted his head, kissing me. “My duffel is in my old room,” he muttered between kisses. “See if he can grab me a change of clothes, would you?”

I nodded, sinking into his mouth again before pulling away to leave through the back door.

My clothes got pummeled as soon as I stepped off the back porch, but I didn't speed up into a run. I never ran in the rain. My bootcut jeans covered my legs, but my toes were bare in my black flip-flops, and while my fitted black polo shirt wouldn't go see-through with getting wet, my arms—bare in their short sleeves—already glistened with the light drizzle.

Stepping through the gate, I traipsed across Jax and Juliet's revamped backyard, complete with a finished deck and a landscaping scene. Fallon had used her engineering and designing expertise to experiment with their space, making it even more beautiful and inviting.

I opened the back door and called out, "Jax!" I stepped in, closing the door behind me. "Juliet!"

"In here," I heard her voice from the bathroom off the side of the kitchen.

Thunder rippled outside, and I bit back my smile as I damn near bounced to the bathroom.

But I stopped short, seeing Juliet leaning over the toilet, coughing.

"Whoa, are you okay?" I rushed to hold her up.

"Oh, I'm fine," she grumbled, flushing the toilet and leaning back up and wiping her mouth with a hand towel. "One drink. One damn drink last night," she complained, "and I wake up feeling like crap. Why am I such a lightweight?"

"You are." I laughed, drawing her a glass of water. "I remember high school."

She arched a brow, glaring at me. "I don't want to relive that. You looked hot, and I was trying to be nice."

"By throwing a beer on me?" I shot back, handing her the glass. "To cool me off, you said?"

She snorted and shook her head at the memory of how tipsy even a little liquor got her before taking some water. She'd never been a big drinker, which was probably good, because neither was Jax.

"I need to grab my cooler," I told her over my shoulder as she followed me out of the bathroom. "I assume it's in the garage?"

She nodded, setting down the glass and righting her dainty red peasant blouse, loosely tucking the hem into her jean shorts.

"And I need to get a change of clothes for Jared. Is Jax in the bedroom?" I inquired, not wanting to walk in on him.

"He's in his office." She jerked her chin to the stairs. "You may as well grab Jared's whole bag. He probably won't be spending any more nights here," she

teased.

Yeah, probably not.

I turned to leave, but she caught my hand.

“I’m happy for you,” she said, her tone even and serious. “You and Jared . . . I didn’t always think he was good enough for you, Tate,” she admitted. “But there was a time when I didn’t think I was, either.”

I stood there, happy that she’d surprised herself.

She squeezed my hand. “He’s a good man.”

I smiled and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks.”

Running up the stairs, I stepped into Jax and Juliet’s bedroom and spotted Jared’s black duffel in the corner by the window.

Quickly stuffing the spilled clothes inside, I lifted the bag by the straps and flung it over my shoulder, thankful that his time in ROTC had at least taught him how to pack light.

I made my way for the door but stopped, spotting a circular black leather box on the dresser.

My jaw tingled with excited energy as I picked it up. I knew I shouldn’t open it, but I had a feeling that Jax was going to ask Juliet soon. And if the ring was just sitting out, then he must’ve already asked her. I wanted to see it.

But then if he did, why hadn’t she told me?

I glanced at the door, seeing no one in the sliver of hallway visible, and looked back down, cracking open the box.

My heart pitter-pattered in my chest, and I felt a rush of excitement in my limbs.

The ring was on a platinum band encrusted with small diamonds, while the centerpiece was a princess cut surrounded by smaller chips. I didn’t know about carats, but the stone had to be nearly as wide as her finger.

“Wow.” I brought my hand to my mouth, covering my whisper. “Holy—”

“Shit?” I heard Jax finish and looked up to see him stepping into the room.

I smiled at him through the happy tears in my eyes. “Are you asking her to marry you?” I inquired. “Or have you already asked her?”

I was so excited for Juliet.

He looked away, the words caught in his throat. “Yes, actually,” he stammered. “But that’s not the ring I’m using.”

At my confused look, he shut the door behind him and spoke low.

“That’s Jared’s,” he told me. “He left it here when he came home a year and a half ago.”

Jared's . . . ? What?

“He left it here when he came home to propose to you,” he finished, the solemn look on his face clearly waiting for my reaction.

My lungs emptied, and I just stood there. I couldn't move.

Jared came home more than a year ago to propose to me?

I dropped the bag, leaning against the dresser, and closed my eyes, walking myself through what he must've felt when he saw me with someone else. Buying a ring, coming home still as in love with me as when he left, and seeing . . .

Jax grabbed my face, turning me to look at him. “Look at me, Tate.” Our eyes locked. “Stop, okay? You did nothing wrong. As with everything, it was bad timing.” His hands cupped my face firmly, and I breathed in and out, trying to move past the ache of regret. I'd never wanted to hurt Jared. But he'd hurt me when he left, and I'd had to push him away.

“You are the love of his life,” Jax continued, “and there was never any question that he was going to make his way back to you and fight for you sooner or later. What's important is that you both move on. You've got a life to live, memories to make with each other, and babies to have.” He shook my face with his last words, bringing me back. “Don't waste another minute.”

He was right. He was always right.

I could spend hours or days feeling bad about Jared wanting to marry me long ago, but I hadn't meant to break his heart. I was simply trying to protect mine.

Now he was here. He loved me, and I loved him. And we were happy. Case closed, and no looking back.

“Jax!” Juliet yelled from downstairs.

He dropped his hands, running into the hallway.

“What's wrong?” He peered over the railing.

“Check your phone! Madoc just texted,” she said, sounding worried.

“Katherine just went into labor. She's having the baby now!”

Chapter 16

Jared

We dove into the elevator, Jax and I with the girls at our sides, and my phone about to crack under the pressure of my fist.

After Madoc's text, Tate had come through the backdoor carrying my duffel, and I had her go start the car while I slipped on some clothes. Jax and Juliet had sped off right away, while I swung by Madoc's house and picked up Pasha. She'd been keeping pretty busy, hanging out with Jax at the Loop and hiking with Madoc, Fallon, and Lucas—their little brother from the Big Brothers Big Sisters program—this past week, but for some reason, I didn't want to leave her out of things.

So I took a small detour, picked her up, and hit the road.

And of all the fucking inconveniences, my mother was in Chicago for the weekend with Jason, since her city friends had convinced her to go to some baby exposition bullshit when she should've been resting.

We sped the entire drive and caught up with Jax.

Once inside the hospital, I sent Pasha to the gift shop to buy flowers. I considered making sure my mom and sister were all right more important than personally picking out her floral arrangement. So while she did that, the rest of us raced up to the third floor.

My muscles tightened in anticipation, and I could feel a trickle of sweat trail down my back. I didn't know why I was so nervous.

It wasn't worry or discomfort. It was definitely nervousness. I rubbed my mouth over my T-shirt on my shoulder, wiping away the thin layer of sweat.

What was I supposed to do with a baby? It was doubtful there would be any connection. Our differences in age would most likely prevent us from bonding.

And it was a girl. What was I supposed to do with a girl?

Luckily, she was little, and it would be a long time before she really interacted with anyone.

But part of me was also depressed by that fact, too.

Madoc, and even Jax, would no doubt catch on very quickly how to play with her and talk to her, but entertaining, much less tolerating, people was never my strong suit.

But I did want her to be close to me. I just had no idea what the hell to do to make that happen.

Madoc had texted that my mom was in suite seven, and since it took us nearly an hour to get to Chicago, navigate traffic to the hospital, and park, the baby was already here and so were Madoc and Fallon, since they'd left before us.

I didn't knock. Barging into the room, though, I slowed, seeing Madoc standing by my mom's bed with the baby already in his arms.

"I got her first," he teased. "Sorry."

He wasn't at all sorry, judging by the shitty-ass grin on his face, but it was okay. I stared at the tightly wrapped pink bundle in Madoc's big arms, looking like nothing more than a little loaf of bread, and I tried to wrap my brain around the fact that that was my sister.

I couldn't even see her, she was so buried in blankets.

Tate stayed at my side, and I could feel my mom watching me as Jax veered around to go to Madoc's side.

"Hey, Quinn Caruthers," he sang, putting a gentle hand on her head.

Madoc looked at her with awe, already in love, while Jax loomed at his side, and I could tell he was itching to get her into his arms.

I didn't know why I felt like a third wheel. I glanced at my mom, who was watching me with patience.

"All of her brothers." She reminded me, urging me with her eyes to go get a closer look at the baby.

I inhaled a deep breath and walked over, flanking Madoc's other side as I dropped my eyes and took in the little bit. The little bit of nothing who was already succeeding in making my knees buckle.

"Isn't she perfect?" Madoc said holding her up on his forearms in front of his body, so we all could see.

And everything inside of me gave way.

My chest splintered in a hundred different cracks, my hands tingled, and what I felt was almost a craving to hold her.

Her glistening eyelids covered her eyes in sleep, so I couldn't tell their color, but the rest of her had a reddish tint that made her look like she'd been through the ringer today.

Her plump new cheeks looked soft and fragile, her nose was no bigger than my pinky nail, and the little triangle gap between her lips as she breathed—every little thing—felt like it was digging its way into my heart. I reached out, unable to resist slipping my finger into her fist.

How could anything be so little?

The tiny fingers—as frail as matchsticks—wrapped around my finger, and my throat swelled, and I tried to swallow against the painful ache, but it was too much.

“We’re your brothers, little girl,” Jax cooed.

“Yeah.” Madoc laughed. “You’re so screwed.”

Everyone laughed, high off the rush of a new baby, but I was falling. The blanket shifted, and I looked down to see her little feet nudge their way out.

“Jesus, she’s little,” I breathed out, amazed. I looked up. “Mom, I . . .”

But my mom was crying, tears streaming down her face, and I immediately felt like shit that I hadn’t gone to her first.

“Are you okay?” I asked, trying to slip away from Quinn’s little fist, but it was no use.

She shook her head clear, smiling. “I’m on top of the world,” she assured me. “The picture I’m looking at right now couldn’t be more perfect.” And she started crying again, looking at Madoc, Jax, and me. Jason brought her head into his chest, looking completely disheveled himself.

“She’s going to be a blonde,” he pointed out, referring to his new daughter.

“How do you know?” Jax asked, curious.

“Because she’s practically bald. Just like Madoc was.”

Madoc snorted and shot his dad an annoyed look.

I put my hand on top of her head, amazed at how it fit in my palm. I felt Tate watching me and looked up to see a smile in her eyes.

“You want to hold her, Jared?” my mom spoke up.

I shook my head. “I don’t think—”

But Madoc was already on me, handing her off. I brought my arms up, feeling them shake under the weight of her weightlessness.

“Oh, shit.” I breathed hard.

“Language.” I heard my mom’s faint mumble.

Madoc took his arms away, slowly lowering her head into the crook of my arm, and even though she weighed nothing, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to hang on to her.

Different from any other feeling I’d ever had.

I pinched my eyebrows together, studying every little inch of her sweet face.

“She’s so small,” I said more to myself than to the others.

“She’ll grow,” Jax commented, peering over my shoulder.

I shook my head, not believing that I was once that little. “So helpless . . .”

Tate finally appeared at my side and kissed her forehead. “A girl with you three as her brothers will be anything but helpless.” She laughed.

My chest suddenly shook, watching as her mouth opened in a little oval as she yawned, and—*holy shit*—I was going to die. Could she get any cuter?

I laughed so I wouldn’t cry. “I feel like my heart is breaking, and I don’t know why. What the hell?”

“It’s love,” I heard my mother say. “Your heart isn’t breaking. It’s growing.”

Tate wrapped her arm around my waist and leaned her head on my arm, both of us watching Quinn.

I leaned down, brushing a kiss on her cheek and inhaling her baby scent.

Jesus, I was pathetic.

“My turn,” Jax shot out, nudging in.

Reluctantly, I handed her off, careful to support her head. I was unnerved by how much I didn’t want to give her up.

Hell, I even hated the thought of ever having to leave Shelburne Falls again.

“Oh, God!”

We all turned, stunned out of our baby trance as Juliet dove for the wastebasket and vomited, turning away from us to hide her display.

“Juliet!” Jax shouted, handing the baby off to our mom as he and Tate rushed over to help.

“Baby, are you okay?” he asked as Tate pulled back her hair.

“Oh, my God,” she groaned, dry heaving over the garbage. “I’m so sorry. I don’t want to make the baby sick if I caught something.”

“Here.” Jax handed her some Kleenex to wipe her mouth and supported her body with his arm.

She pushed him away, lurching again and emptying just about everything else she had in her stomach.

“Oh, no.” A nurse walked in, shoving the water pitcher at me as she rushed to Juliet’s side.

“I’m sorry,” Juliet mumbled, holding her hand over her mouth, a pink blush settling on her skin.

I put the pitcher down on my mom's little dinner table and poured some water for both her and Juliet.

"No harm done," the nurse soothed. "Come with me." And she placed a hand on her back, guiding her out.

Jax and Tate made a move to follow, but Juliet stopped them. "No, you stay. Both of you," she ordered. "I'll be fine. Stay with Quinn. I'll see you in the waiting room."

"You're not fine," Jax shot out.

"Stay," she commanded. "Please, I'll feel bad. I'm just going to the bathroom, anyway. I'll see you in a minute."

Jax stood at the doorway, watching her go, and the rest of us took seats on the couch, laughing at Madoc taking selfies with Quinn.

"Looks like the cruise is shot," I commented, noticing that the time on my phone already read after four in the afternoon.

By the time we'd gotten to the hospital and visited with my mom, Jason, and Quinn, it was nearly time to head home for Tate's race tonight.

Thankfully, the weather had cleared up, so Jax was expecting a full crowd.

"It's okay." Tate nuzzled in under my arm, wrapping her arm around my waist. "This was a much better day anyway."

She looked over at Jax on her other side and then up at me. "Your sister is a very lucky girl. You both know that, right?"

Jax and I shared a look, laughing to ourselves.

"What?" Tate looked back and forth between us.

I shook my head, knowing what she meant, but . . .

"Well," I started, "my first thought was that she needs other kids to grow up with. She'll be lonely."

"Yeah," Jax chimed in, lifting his water bottle to his lips and agreeing with me.

"Well," Tate argued, "you may be surprised at how much you'll all make sure she's *not* lonely."

"Good point," I added. And she was probably right. My mother was spot on about our roles with our sister.

As soon as I held her fragile, helpless body, I'd known that I would run into the middle of a stampede for her.

“Hey.” Jax approached the nurse’s station. “My girlfriend was sick. A nurse took her somewhere, but I haven’t seen her or heard anything.”

“Juliet Carter?” she said right away. “Yeah, she’s in room two.”

“They put her in a room?” he asked, confused, and Tate shot me a worried look.

The nurse nodded and gestured to the left with her hand.

I dug in my eyebrows, a little worried.

Even though I’d grown pretty fond of Juliet, she was still normally off my radar. Her interests, hobbies, and well-being weren’t high on my list of priorities, so I’d never paid her much mind. But I had to admit she was head over heels for my brother, as well as loyal and nurturing. And she worked hard, never expecting things to be handed to her.

She deserved him, and he deserved her.

Jax barreled for room two, pushing open the door, while Tate and I quickly followed.

“Jesus,” Jax cursed as soon as he entered the room. “Is she okay?”

We rushed in, seeing her asleep on top of the covers, looking peaceful and still wearing the same clothes as before.

He rushed to her side, looking her up and down. “What the hell?” he whispered, turning to the nurse who had trailed in behind us.

She stopped, a stunned look on her face. “I’m sorry, sir?”

“What’s wrong with her?” I said softly, careful not to wake Juliet.

Tate had stepped up next to Jax, looking down at her friend.

“I just came on duty,” she explained. “As far as I know, though, she’s fine. They just wanted her to rest and get hydrated.” She looked around to all of us. “She’ll be fine to leave in a bit. No worries.”

“Well, is something wrong? She’s my girlfriend.” Jax’s worried eyes were trying to connect the dots just like the rest of us. But with no luck.

“Not at all.” Her voice sounded light. “It’s very common to have a hard time holding anything down in the first trimester. She’ll be fine. Just make sure she drinks as much water as possible.”

Jax’s eyes nearly bugged out of his goddamn head, and I almost choked on my breath.

“Tri-what?” I forced out.

“Jax,” Tate gasped, looking between us, smiling with her hand over her mouth.

“I’m sorry.” Jax shook his head, zoning in on the poor young nurse. “What

the hell did you just say?”

Realization dawned, and she straightened. “Oh,” she said, looking caught. “I’m sorry. I thought a doctor spoke to you.” She inched up to the bed, embarrassment warming her face.

“She’s pregnant?” Jax blurted.

The nurse nodded, checking the water pitcher on the table. “Yes, about five weeks. From what the other nurse said before she left, it doesn’t sound like your girlfriend was aware, either.” She turned to leave and then faced Jax again. “And I am sorry again. I thought you were informed.”

She left the room, and Jax leaned down on the bed, staring at Juliet. Tate squeezed my hand, and I felt a sudden need to get her alone. It had been a crazy day.

Jax brought up his hand, caressing Juliet’s face, and then placed it on her stomach, looking like he was trying to wrap his head around the news.

“Let’s go,” I whispered to Tate. My brother needed to be alone with his girl right now.

Keeping hold of Tate’s hand, I led her out of the room and walked down the hall, finding the single-person restroom. With all the chaos today, not to mention that we still had her race tonight, I needed to steal a few minutes with her.

Pulling her inside, I backed her up to the door and took her by the neck, crashing my mouth down on hers.

She moaned, surprised as she slipped her hands under my T-shirt to hold on to my back. Her mouth was so warm, and I nibbled her lips, too damn hungry to get my mouth on the rest of her body.

“So,” she tried speaking between kisses, “a kid for Quinn to grow up with. Just like you wanted.”

I unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down over her ass and grabbed her naked flesh in my hands as I continued attacking her lips.

“I love you,” I whispered. “I want everything with you, Tate.”

Then I knelt down, sliding the jeans and underwear off her legs, taking the flip-flops with them.

She threaded her fingers through my hair and dropped her head back, gasping as I swung her leg over my shoulder and ran my tongue over her clit.

“You’ll have everything with me.” She sucked in mouthfuls of air. “I’m yours, Jared.”

“Damn right you are,” I growled, licking the smooth skin of her delicate heat. I snatched her up between my lips and sucked.

“Oh,” she moaned, looking down to watch me.

“I saw the ring in Jax’s room,” she admitted, her voice shaking. “I know about when you came home. I feel terrible, and I don’t know that I should, but . . .”

The tip of my tongue prodded her entrance while she spoke, and she squirmed against my lips, wanting more.

I pulled away, rubbing circles over the nub of her clit with my thumb. “I was shattered when I had to leave you,” I explained. “I hated myself, but I had to go. I had to do it. Just like you had to try to move on and live in a world I didn’t try to dominate all the time.”

I gripped her sexy-as-hell ass and brought her in again, eating and taking her hard.

“Jared,” she whimpered. Then: “Why did you want to marry me?”

Huh?

I leaned back, seeing her desperate eyes, on fire with love but rippled with need.

Standing up, I wrapped my arms around her and held her body close. “How could I not?”

How could she not know that she was it for me?

“Twelve years,” I continued, “and I have never stopped wanting you, Tate. Not for a single day have I been free of you.” I put us forehead to forehead, nose to nose. “I want everything. I want you to finish school. I want the wedding with our friends and family. I want the house, and I want our kids, Tate.”

I pressed my lips to hers until I could feel my teeth digging into the inside of my lips.

“And if you don’t want some of that or any of that,” I pointed out, “then I’ll bend, because above anything else”—I looked her in the eye—“I want you.”

Her beautiful blue storms pooled like the rainy days she lived for, and I pulled back, unbuttoning my jeans, never satisfied that I’d have enough of her.

Lifting her by the backs of her thighs, I slid her down my cock, kissing her to drown out her sudden cry.

Thrusting inside of her, I whispered against her mouth. “Forever.”

She closed her eyes, a blush crossing her cheeks. “Forever,” she complied. “After we settle an old score, of course.”

And I shot my eyes up, seeing her lips curl with an idea.

“An old score?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she confirmed, keeping her eyes closed. “You and I have

unfinished business, Jared Trent.”
Shit.

Chapter 17

Tate

“I don’t get the point of this.” Jared pulled on his black hoodie. The rain had cooled everything down considerably.

“Simple,” I explained. “We’ve had two races, and I haven’t won one yet. I want one more chance before we start a new slate.”

“What are you talking about?” he shot back, running his hand through his brown hair and making it stick up in perfect messiness. “You won the first one we had four years ago,” he pointed out.

“Did I?”

His face fell, and he looked annoyed as he arched a brow at me.

I smirked, reaching through my open back window and grabbing my own hoodie.

“Tate.” He came up, placing his hands on my waist. “You and I don’t need to race.”

“We do.” I put my foot down. “This is my last race, Jared.”

He fell silent, and I turned around, looking up at him studying me. Taking his hand, I leaned back into the car and pulled him close, wanting privacy from the Loop crowd a few feet away.

“We’ll always share our love of cars,” I started, keeping my voice even. “And we’ll have a lot of fun driving and pulling our own little stunts in the years to come, but . . .” I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words to make him understand.

“Growing up, I always thought I’d share this with you,” I admitted. “From the first time you mentioned the Loop when we were ten, it was going to be Jared and me at the race. Jared and me in our car. Jared and me a team.” I swallowed down the dream that really never came to fruition.

I cleared my throat. “When you left, it was like what you were talking about when you were on your bike on the track . . . about how it was the only time we were together. Remember?”

He stayed still, studying me warily. I could tell he was concerned that I'd be giving up something I loved for the wrong reasons.

"Well"—I nodded—"that's what the Loop has been like for me ever since you left. A way to be close to you when I fooled myself into thinking it helped me survive without you." I shook my head, dropping my eyes. "It didn't," I confessed. "I have no glory to seek here, and I have no interest in pursuing anything more advanced. Medicine is where my ambitions lie, and although I love driving, the only way I want on this track from now on"—I met his gaze—"is if we're in the same car."

I liked driving, but it wasn't love for me like it was for Jared. And I didn't want to enjoy it without him anymore.

I tightened my arms around his waist. "I know your heart is on the track, but I don't need this, and I don't want it unless I'm sitting next to you. It's time my energies went elsewhere."

He grazed his fingers down both sides of my face, sending shivers down my arms. "But you love this," he maintained, looking at me with concern.

"I *like* this," I corrected him. "I *love* it with you."

He tipped my chin up, kissing me, and in less than a moment, my body heated. I loved the way he tasted.

"So . . ." I pulled back, blinking away the haze he'd created. "It's my last race, and the last time you and I will be opponents—or enemies, for that matter—and I want it to be you. No one else."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "And what makes you think I won't just let you win?"

"Because it's also a bet," I retorted, the mischief thick in my voice. "If I win, I get to propose to you in front of all of these people."

He rolled his eyes, walking away from me.

"And it'll make you feel really feminine in front of the huge crowd and their phone cameras," I went on, talking to his back. "And it'll be a superinteresting story—if not a little unmanly—to tell our children someday. And my father will probably lose all respect for you, but when I get down on one knee, baby," I teased, "you're just going to melt and swoon."

"Good God," he whined, turning around and looking like he ate something bad. "I think I lost a testicle listening to this." And then he turned back around, ordering over his shoulder, "You're not proposing."

"But, sweetheart," I yelled, catching the others' attention. "You love it when I'm alpha."

Bystanders laughed, and I smiled as Jared shook his head as he walked away from me, probably seeking escape by going to find Jax and Madoc.

I locked my car and slipped on my hoodie as I walked over to Juliet sitting in a quad chair next to Jax's car.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, seeing a fleece blanket and two bottles of water lying next to the chair on the ground.

"Shaky," she admitted. "But I'm okay. Jax wanted us to stay home, but when I heard you and Jared were racing I insisted we come."

I picked up the blanket and folded it, setting it on Jax's car.

"How did he take the news?" I asked, looking over at him and seeing Madoc giving him shit.

"A lot better than me." She sighed. "He has a case of water in the trunk and actually put a blanket on me, as if it's not summertime," she complained, sounding cute. "He already YouTubed how to deliver a baby in an emergency, so I think he warmed up to the idea pretty fast," she joked, laughing.

"And you?"

She shrugged, letting out a breath. "I'm on the pill. Or was," she added. "We were never careless, even after two years of being together. I definitely wasn't prepared for this." She stared off, and I followed her gaze to see her watching her boyfriend. A slight smile graced her face. "But he keeps touching my stomach, like he'll be able to feel it move already." She laughed. "I would never have tried to have a baby right now, but I just look at him, and all of a sudden I can't wait. We're actually having a baby together."

I leaned down, giving her a big hug. It was nice to know Jax was planning on proposing before they knew about the baby. Seeing her still bare finger, I guessed he was going to make an occasion out of it.

And thanks to the impromptu news today, it would probably be sooner rather than later.

"Everyone is here for you, you know that, right?" I told her. "And Fallon will be pregnant soon, so you won't be alone."

She looked at me, confused. "How do you know that?"

I sighed. "It happens in threes. Katherine, you, and it won't be me, so . . ."

We laughed, knowing it very well could be me, but with Jax having a baby, I was sure Madoc would play it up and get Fallon to fold.

"Tatum Brandt!" someone bellowed. "Get your ass over here!"

I shot up, staring wide-eyed into the crowd. *What . . . ?*

I glanced at Juliet, and she just smiled, recognizing Jared's voice, too.

Staying frozen in place—because I didn’t answer to that name, and he damn well knew it—I finally saw him rise above the crowd as he stood on . . . what I could only assume was his car’s hood.

His head cocked to the side, and the spectators looked between him and me. The music cut off, and I watched his easy, self-satisfied body language as he spoke.

“You want to race me or what?” he challenged, the same defiant and cocky attitude in his expression that I hated and loved in high school.

My heart picked up pace, and I crossed my arms over my chest, inching toward the crowd.

“You know I do,” I replied with sass. “Why are you acting like you have better things to do all of a sudden?”

“With you?” he shot back. “We definitely have better things to do.”

The crowd buzzed with laughter at Jared’s clear innuendo, but I smiled, unembarrassed. I’d learned to fight back a long time ago.

I looked around at the crowd. “I think he’s afraid I’ll win, don’t you?” I asked my rhetorical question and heard the amused crowd turn to him for his reaction.

He jumped down from his car, and we walked toward each other through the parting crowd.

He jeered, “You win? I’ve raced here twice as much as you have. I think I can handle seeing you in my rearview mirror, Tatum,” he joked, getting my heart pumping faster with his mock insults, which gave me *déjà vu*. Which, I guessed, was why he was egging me on.

To get me pumped up.

I put my hand on my heart, feigning sympathy. “Oh, but sweetheart? Didn’t anyone tell you?” I approached him, smiling. “This is a chicken race,” I informed him. “I won’t be behind you. I won’t be next to you.” I leaned in to whisper. “I’ll be coming at you, baby.”

The smirk on his face slowly fell to his feet, and I bit back the urge to laugh.

Priceless. Damn, I’m good.

Jared’s heated eyes turned fierce, and he looked around for his brother.

I snorted as Jax stepped up, rolling his eyes. “Thanks, Tate,” he said sarcastically. “I hadn’t told him yet.”

“What is she talking about?” Jared’s hard voice sounded tense, and I tried not to grin. It wasn’t often I could surprise him.

“Uh, yeah,” Jax inched out, sounding apologetic. “It’s a new feature here, brother. You both take off from the starting line but in opposite directions,” he explained, glancing at me. “You have the whole track to work with until you pass each other, which you’ll do in your own lanes,” Jax gritted out, telling me specifically, since I’d never done this before either, and he wanted to make sure I understood.

I raised my eyebrows, eyeing Jared. “But at the finish line . . . ,” I hinted.

“At the finish line,” Jax took my cue, “on the last turn, you have to cruise in between the barriers to make the finish count.”

He pointed to the waist-high plastic barriers, sometimes used in road construction, that were being positioned behind him to make a single lane on the track.

“That makes a lane only wide enough for one car,” Jax observed.

I couldn’t control the bounce in my feet. “Exactly,” I remarked.

“Whoever makes it first . . .” Jax nodded. “Well, you get the idea.”

I swung around, heading for my car as Jax blew a whistle, clearing the track.

“Tate!” Jared shouted, his voice being drowned out in the crowd. “I’m not doing this!”

“If you don’t,” I called over my shoulder, “someone else will, and I won’t be as safe with them as I will be with you, right?”

I opened my car and climbed inside.

“You’re a brat!” I saw him growl in the middle of the crowd.

I cocked my head, sticking it out the window. “I love you,” I shot back, teasing.

And thank goodness he didn’t put up more of a fight. Hesitating only a moment, he shook his head, looking defeated, before turning around and walking for his own ride, which already sat on the track.

Jared’s car was a piece of art, and everyone had been all over it since we’d gotten here.

Turning the ignition, I revved the engine and brought my hands up, squeezing the steering wheel against the hot rush in my blood.

The crowd had dissipated, either going farther off to the sidelines or to the bleachers, and I released the clutch, pulling myself up onto the track. Swinging around, I pulled up next to Jared, both of us facing opposite directions and our driver’s sides sitting next to each other.

“You’ve never gone easy on me,” I told him, my tone serious. “Don’t hold

back now.”

He stared out the front windshield, clearly hating what I wanted from him.

Reaching over, I cranked up the music and then gathered up my hair, tying it up into a ponytail.

He finally looked over at me, and a smile crept out as, he too, reached over and turned up his music.

“Welcome, everyone!” We heard Zack’s voice come over the loudspeaker.

I looked over to see Madoc and Fallon sitting on the bleachers, while Jax and Juliet crossed the track in front of my car, heading over there as well.

The crowd, a mix of high school students as well as friends from way back, took out phones to start videotaping. Many of them were well aware of Jared’s and my history, so they had a vested interest in seeing this little showdown.

Jared’s mouth curled into a grin, and I couldn’t help my foot tapping as anticipation sent shivers up my spine.

He knew I liked the way he looked at me, and he was trying to throw me off. Okay, maybe not on purpose, but whatever.

“These two,” Zack started, booming over the speaker, “need no introduction. It’s a matchup that rivals any we’ve ever had here, and they never fail to bring a few fireworks to the Loop.”

The crowd cheered, and I checked the shifter to make sure I was in first.

“Jared and Tate?” Zack continued. “Best of luck.”

The spectators cheered, and I let out a hard sigh as Jared rolled up the window.

I did the same, lowering the music for a moment.

“Ready!” Zack boomed, since from the position I was in, I couldn’t see the signal lights.

“Set!” I heard, swallowing through the dryness in my mouth.

Jared and I both pressed the gas, too excited to contain it.

“Go!” The roar raged through my ears, and Jared and I tore away from each other, the screech of our tires sending the crowd cheering louder.

I shot down into second and then up into third, gaining speed quickly and smoothly. Jared and I pulled farther and farther away from each other, and glancing in my rearview mirror, I was surprised that I didn’t really like seeing his distance away from me increase. I could almost feel it on my skin.

Just like magnets.

His brake lights flashed, and I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, seeing him skid around the next corner.

Shit.

Hitting the gas, I shifted straight into fifth, skipping fourth altogether and spinning around the turn. The rotten thing about my car was that it was about three hundred pounds heavier than his, so he could maneuver quicker and easier.

Shooting back into third, I hit the gas, charged ahead, and shot back up to fifth and then sixth. Jared's muscle car looked like a rocket blowing up rainwater on the track as it raced ahead toward the next turn.

I tensed my thigh muscles, feeling a thrill creep up my insides.

Damn, he was hot. I couldn't see him through his blacked-out windows, but he was still managing to turn me the hell on.

Surfing around the next turn, I charged ahead, staying on my right as Jared plowed toward me, and I let out a laugh as he passed.

I loved racing him. I always felt the rush, and no matter whom else I'd raced, nothing felt as good.

A chill spread over my skin, despite the hoodie, and I didn't hesitate to barrel around the next turn, charging ahead.

I didn't want to win or need to win, but I wanted to have this with him.

My music cut off, and my phone started ringing on the touch screen. I pressed Accept Call.

"Yes?" I answered.

"What happens if I win?" Jared asked, and his velvet voice caressed my skin.

I hesitated, not sure how to answer. "Then . . ." I searched for words. "Then I guess I trust that you'll always give me your best."

He was quiet, and I could hear the crowd ahead.

"And if I lose?" he asked, sounding unusually sad. "Will you still trust that I gave you my best?"

A lump rose in my throat, and I blinked away the sudden tears.

"Jared." I folded my lips between my teeth, trying not to cry. He wanted to know if I trusted him.

"I can't promise I'll wake up every day operating at a hundred percent, Tate," he admitted. "No one can."

I heard his voice change as he struggled to round the last turn, and I shifted down, doing the same, the steering wheel trying to pull against me as I skidded.

"But"—he breathed hard from the exertion—"I can promise I'll always put you first."

"Then, prove it," I urged in a thoughtful voice. "Meet my match."

I shot down into fifth and then up into sixth, seeing his lights ahead.

This was it. One of us was going between the barriers, and the other would be forced to take the lane to the outside, and he was fucking with my head right now, and I just wanted him to race.

“Tate . . . ,” he said in a hesitant voice.

“Jared, just go,” I pressed. “It’s you. It’s only you. You’re the only one who challenges me, so challenge me! Don’t hold back. I trust you.”

I squeezed the wheel, my eyebrows pinching together as I pressed myself back into the seat.

Go, go, go . . .

Shooting for the starting line, I pushed the gas to the floor, seeing him charge ahead, both of us in the path marked by the barriers.

“Tate!” he barked.

“Go!” I yelled.

Jax had lines marked on the track, giving drivers notice for their last chance to exit, but judging my space, I knew I was going to make it.

I was going to make it, and I didn’t want Jared to ease up. *Give me everything!*

I held the wheel, my arm like a steel bar, and sucked in breaths as my heart beat like a jackhammer.

“Fuck!” Jared cursed, barreling straight for me. “Tate, stop!”

His car, my car, one lane, right for each other, the barriers in three . . . two . . . one . . . and . . .

No!

I screamed, twisting the wheel right, every muscle in my body in a nightmare of pain as I swerved out of his way and passed the barriers, nearly whimpering out of fear as I winced.

Oh, God!

I let breath after breath pour out of me as I took quick glances behind me several times to see that he was on the other side of the barriers, too.

He’d tapped out. Just like me.

Shit. I dropped my head back, terrified by what had almost happened, as I slowed to halt.

Shaking my head, horrified and relieved at the same time, I realized the irony.

He’d put me first. Just like he’d promised.

The crowd descended, and I climbed out of my car, feeling shaky and weak.

“You’re absolutely crazy!” I heard him yell as he made his way through the crowd. “Does Stanford know how reckless you are?” he attacked.

I straightened but averted my eyes, feeling a little contrite. He had every right to be pissed. I’d messed with his head, telling him to give me his very best, which would also put both of us in danger. Which choice had I expected him to make? But before I had a chance to apologize, he threw a small box at me. “Here.”

I shot up my hands to catch it.

“Open that,” he ordered.

I studied the cylindrical black leather box and immediately knew what it was.

He stayed a few feet back, but the crowd surrounded us, and I saw our friends push to the front of the audience.

I did as he said and opened it, revealing the platinum band, the princess-cut diamond that had been meant for me. Gasps exploded in the crowd and even some squeals, probably from the high school girls who thought his rudeness was cute.

I twisted my lips to the side, taking in his angry arched eyebrow.

“So this is how you propose?” I asked sternly. “Because I kind of have a problem with a ring being thrown in my face and you not kneeling like my father would expect.”

I looked at Jax and a laughing Madoc and continued, “Not that I expected Jared to kneel—I know he’s not the type—but I damn well expect a gesture, and —”

I looked down, seeing Jared in front of me on one knee.

“Oh,” I whispered, shutting up.

Snorts could be heard in the crowd, and I let him take my hand as he smiled up at me.

My heart pounded, and butterflies swarmed in my stomach.

“Tate.” He spoke slowly, looking into my eyes in a way that was still so much like the boy I grew up with but more like the man I’d grown to love.

“You’re written all over my body,” he spoke low, just for us. “The tattoos can never be erased. You hold my heart, and you can never be replaced.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to stay composed.

He continued, “I only live when I’m with you, and I’m asking for your heart, your love, and your future.” He smiled. “Will you please be my wife?”

My chin trembled, and my chest shook, and I couldn’t help it. I covered my

smile with my hand and let the tears fall.

The crowd around us started cheering, and I caressed his face as he stood up and lifted me up off the ground.

“Now, that’s how you propose,” I joked through my shakes.

“You going to answer me, then?”

I laughed. “Yes.” I nodded frantically. “Yes, I would love to marry you.”

After the Loop, we escaped.

Just the two of us to Mario’s for a late dinner and then home. I couldn’t stop the flutter in my chest.

I think it was the happiest day I’d ever had.

Jared had slipped the ring on my finger and held me close, tucked under his chin as we called my father on Skype with his phone.

Apparently, he’d asked my dad a year and a half ago, and true to fashion, my father didn’t share business that wasn’t his to share or interfere in situations he knew needed to play out. We also found out that was why he’d never accepted other offers on the house. He knew Jared would come home eventually.

I looked up at Jared, resting my head on his arm behind me. “I’m sorry about the tree,” I said, feeling bad as we sat in the middle of it, me between his legs and lying back against his chest.

“I know.” His voice was gentle. “It’ll heal. Everything does with time.”

Looking down, I studied the ring, feeling its happy weight on my finger. There were still lots of things to work out—living arrangements while I went to school, his career—but it was small potatoes considering what we’d survived to be together. Two assurances I had come to realize about life: Almost nothing turns out exactly the way you plan, but I’d be happy only if he was by my side. There was no choice.

“If you don’t like it, we can exchange it,” he spoke up, seeing me admire the ring.

“No, I love it,” I assured him. “It’s perfect.” And then I smiled. “My new lifeline.”

Jared snorted, remembering my lifelines from high school. The things I always made sure to have on me when I went out, just in case I needed to escape him.

He leaned in, kissing my hair. “I don’t want to wait to marry you,” he

whispered, and I nuzzled into him, loving him so much.
I didn't want to wait, either.

Chapter 18

Jared

Three Months Later

“Knock it off.” I jerked away from Madoc’s hands as he fiddled with my tie.

“But it’s crooked,” he argued, yanking me back. “And it looks like shit.”

I gave in, standing still and trying not to feel creeped out as another guy straightened my necktie.

My entire suit was black, of course, but I’d added a vest for extra effect.

Madoc leaned in, his mouth inches from mine. “Mmmm, you smell good,” he purred.

I jerked back, wincing. “Get off me,” I grumbled, shoving him away, and he hunched over, his face turning red from laughing so hard.

Jax hurried over to my side, smiling. “She’s here.”

I grinned but then hid it right away. Grabbing the back of my neck, I put my head down and tried to get my pulse under control. Hell, get my temperature under control, for that matter. I felt sweat on my back, even though it was late September and the weather had started cooling off already.

I looked around the pond—our fishpond—and focused on the small man-made waterfall display with little rapids cascading down the rocks, and I remembered her here when we were little.

This was where I’d thought I lost her when I was fourteen, so as a measure to make sure that no bad memory ever controlled us again, we both agreed that this was where we’d be married.

This was the start of new memories and new adventures.

Jason and Ciaran, Fallon’s father who had employed my brother for a time and become part of the family in a way, stood off to the side, chatting casually—which was surprising, considering they worked on opposite sides of the law. My mom—glowing and with newfound energy—sat on a ledge, holding Quinn in her arms, while Pasha stood next to the pond’s edge dressed in a tight silver and

black dress, standing out like a sore thumb.

Lucas, Madoc's "little brother", played on his phone, while Lucas's mom and Miss Penley—or Lizzy, as we were allowed to call her now, but I refused, because it was weird—cooed over my new little sister.

James, Tate's dad, and his new fiancée had bought a house between Chicago and Shelburne Falls, an easy commute that wouldn't disrupt either of their jobs. They were planning a summer ceremony next year.

Juliet, Fallon, and James were all with Tate, I assumed, and Madoc and Jax were standing up for me.

"You know, you didn't have to do this," Madoc spoke up, straightening his own tie. "Jax is your brother. It would make sense that he'd stand up for you at your wedding."

I saw the officiant approach and pointed out to Madoc, "You're my brother, too. I can't choose between either of you any more than Tate could choose between Fallon and Juliet."

When we'd had to tell the officiant the names of my best man and her maid—or matron of honor, we didn't second-guess ourselves. Fallon and Juliet for her, Jax and Madoc for me.

"You know we could've just had this at my house," he suggested. "There's plenty of room on the grounds, and you wouldn't have had to limit the guest list."

"We limited it out of preference," I corrected him, "not necessity. Tate and I wanted small and private," I told him, knowing he preferred big and flashy. "And we wanted it here," I added.

"Okay." He dropped the subject, accepting my reasoning. And I knew he understood.

Although Madoc had had an impromptu wedding at a bar, I don't think he regretted it for a second. He loved Fallon, and they had just wanted to get married. The rest didn't matter.

Tate and I waited a little longer than he and Fallon did, but not by much.

We'd spent the rest of the summer between Shelburne Falls—relaxing with our friends and enjoying our family—and California, looking for an apartment near Stanford and spending time at my shop.

Once school started, Tate got settled in as I commuted home to her as much as possible. The wedding date and details here were already set, so all we had to do was fly in and then fly out.

For Christmas, we were spending a week here with family and then a week

locked in a cabin in Colorado for a delayed honeymoon. Tate had it in her head that we'd ski.

Yeah, no.

Just the thought of her walking around a cozy cabin dressed in nothing but a long sweater that showed off her beautiful legs in the firelight . . .

I might ski. If she was really nice.

After the ceremony today, we were having a small, private dinner and then going home to our house; we were already having fun planning what to renovate whenever we were able to make it home in the future.

"You didn't invite a shitload of people to your house for a party tonight, did you?" I shot Madoc a knowing look. He loved parties and looked for any excuse to have one.

But he looked insulted. "Of course not," he answered and then jerked his chin, standing up straight. "Here we go, dude."

I turned my head, hearing the music start, and suddenly my pulse starting raging—pumping like a machine gun under my skin—and I focused on the path next to the rocks. Where I knew she was coming from.

Four cello players sat above us on a rock landing, playing Apocalyptica's rendition of "Nothing Else Matters," and everything hurt as I looked around. In a good way, I guess. I just wanted to see her so badly.

Juliet came first, dressed in a light pink, knee-length dress, her hair spilling around her, and I heard my brother's sharp intake of breath. Her small baby bump was visible under her high-waisted dress, but she looked great, having gotten over the morning sickness.

Fallon trailed behind her in a gray dress similar to Juliet's, her hair in long curls, and I caught her wink at Madoc before coming to stand next to Juliet on the other side of the officiant.

I darted my eyes over to the rocks again, keeping them glued there. I hadn't seen Tate in more than twenty-four hours because our friends had decided that keeping us separate would make the wedding day more special. But I couldn't wait anymore.

I'd waited for years.

She appeared, arm in arm with her dad, and I smiled, locking eyes with her. "She's beautiful," I heard Madoc say.

I blew out a slow breath, feeling my eyes burn as my throat tightened.

I blinked away the tears and clenched my jaw, trying everything to keep myself steady.

“Just look at her, okay?” Jax whispered. “Hold her eyes, and you’ll be fine.”

I swallowed the needles in my throat and looked up at her again, seeing the joy and peace all over her face.

Why did I feel like I was in pain?

She’d never looked more beautiful.

Her strapless dress had a sweetheart neckline—don’t ask how I knew that shit now—that featured glimmering jewels on the bodice that brought out the glow in the smooth skin of her neck and arms. The bottom of the antique white dress was tulle that held layer upon layer all the way to the ground, and even though the dress was beautiful, I didn’t care about every little feature. All I knew was that she broke my heart looking like a dream that was all mine.

Her hair hung perfect in loose curls, and she wore light makeup enhancing every bit of her. Looking down, I saw white Chucks peek out of the dress as she walked, and I couldn’t help but laugh to myself.

She stepped up, not taking her eyes off of me as her dad kissed her cheek and handed her over.

I knew it wasn’t a politically correct practice anymore—fathers handing responsibility for a daughter’s care over to a man—but it meant something to me.

And I never doubted that she’d take care of me just as much as I did her.

I clasped her hand in mine and felt James’s hand grip my arm reassuringly before he stepped aside.

I looked up at the officiant, nodding at him to get going.

“Can you hurry up?” I urged, hearing Madoc and Jax laugh at my side.

I didn’t mean to be rude, but Tate was like a meal I was being forced to stare at as I starved.

The dude smiled and opened his folder to begin.

I looked down at Tate, barely hearing his words. “I love you,” I whispered.

I love you, too, she mouthed, smiling.

The people around us listened to the officiant’s short speech about love and communication, trust and tolerance, but I didn’t take my eyes off Tate for a single second.

It’s not that we didn’t need to listen. We knew we didn’t know everything, and we knew we were going to fight. We’d learned too many lessons the hard way to take for granted how far we’d come.

But I couldn’t not look at her. It was too perfect a day.

The officiant passed it off to me as Jax handed him the rings, and he handed me Tate's.

I put it on her finger, sliding it only halfway as I spoke only to her.

"As my friend, I liked you," I whispered. "As my enemy, I craved you. As a fighter, I loved you, and as my wife"—I slid the ring the rest of the way on—"I keep you." I squeezed her hand. "Forever," I promised.

Silent tears spilled down her cheeks, and she smiled, even though her chest shook. Taking my ring from the man's hand, she slipped it on my finger.

"When you left me the first time, I was devastated," she said, speaking of when we were fourteen. "And when you left me the second time, I was defiant. But both times I regret," she admitted, keeping her voice low. "I always fought with you instead of fighting for you, and if I commit to doing one thing differently for the rest of our lives, Jared"—she inhaled a deep breath, steadying her voice—"it would be to make sure you always know that I will fight for you." She blinked, sending more tears down her cheeks. "Forever."

I knew it without needing to hear her say it, but it still felt good to hear. Being a kid was hard. Being a kid with no one to count on changed my life. And hers. She knew how much I needed her.

I saved the officiant the trouble and took the back of her neck in my hand before pulling her in for a kiss.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pressed her body into mine and kissed my wife for almost longer than necessary, getting lost in her taste and scent, before pulling back slightly to lean my forehead into hers.

Laughter and snickers erupted around us, but I didn't care. I'd waited long enough, in my opinion.

After the ceremony, Madoc slapped me on the shoulder as we all trailed toward the cars. "I'll lead," he instructed, meaning what, I didn't know.

We had a lot of cars between us all, but I saw no reason to make a parade. But whatever.

Climbing in the black limo behind Tate, I closed the door and instructed the driver to follow the GTO. He then closed the privacy glass, and I wasted no time hauling Tate into my lap.

I bunched up the dress to allow her legs to straddle me, and the poor girl sank into a cloud like it was a patch of quicksand. I saw just her face.

"I really love this dress"—I slid my hands up her silky thighs—"but it's a pain in the ass."

I took her hips in my hands and pulled her in for a kiss, not caring that she

was messing up my hair, which my mother had made me style to perfection today.

The limo took off, following the GTO and trailed by everyone else.

“Our wedding turned me on,” I admitted, slipping my hand inside her underwear. “Will you let me get to third base right now?” I teased.

She nuzzled into my neck, kissing and playing, and—I closed my eyes, groaning—*fuck dinner*. We needed a room.

But horns sounded outside, and Tate sat up, peering out the window.

“What the hell?” she breathed out, sliding off my lap.

I winced, my cock stretching painfully against my pants.

Looking out the window, I immediately rolled it down, seeing the city street littered with all of our friends. All of them not invited to the ceremony, because it was family only.

What? Horns honked, people whistled, and I even noticed a few of Tate’s old track teammates clapping.

Although it was a surprise, it was kind of touching to see the people we’d grown up with sharing this.

“Oh, he did not . . .,” Tate seethed, thinking the exact same thing I was.

Madoc.

He’d told everybody.

And speak of the devil. I leaned out the window, seeing that Madoc had done a U-turn and cruised past us, grinning from ear to ear.

“I lied,” he admitted, all too proud of himself. “Huge fucking party at my house.” And he sped off laughing.

Tate’s wide eyes met mine, and she shook her head, amazed.

All of these people were going to be there, apparently.

I rolled up the window, and Tate slid back onto my lap, sighing.

“He’s got rooms,” she taunted over my mouth, looking at the bright side. “Lots of rooms for us to get lost in.”

And I leaned up, grabbing her lips with mine as I shucked off my jacket. “Who needs a room?”

Chapter 19

Tate

One Year Later

“You need to relax,” Pasha scolded, standing next to me. “It’s his last race, so stop fussing.”

I craned my neck while fidgeting with my hands, seeing Jared weave around all the twists and turns, and I really hated how his bike always looked like it was about to tip over when he leaned into a curve.

“I can’t,” I choked out, sticking my thumbnail in my mouth. “I hate it when he’s out there.”

All of us stood off to the side—Pasha, Madoc, Jax, Juliet, Fallon, and me—lucky enough in not having to stay in the bleachers with the crowd, but unfortunately, we didn’t have as great a view, either. Jared’s mom and stepdad were up there, and Addie, Madoc’s housekeeper, was back at the hotel with Quinn and Hawke, Jax and Juliet’s infant son. The speedway in Anaheim was packed with fans wanting to see Jared’s last race, and although he was going to miss racing, we decided he needed to focus his full attention on the business, JT Racing.

He’d made good connections during his time here, and while I finished medical school—when I finished—he had every confidence that we’d be able to take the business back home and his clients with us.

“And it could be a bad one if he has to worry about you worrying,” Pasha complained. “Let him enjoy it.”

I tried to, but racing on the bikes always put me on edge. At least the car offered some sort of protection. Like armor. Biking wasn’t like that, and racers fell into two groups: those who had been in accidents and those who would be in accidents.

It was only a matter of time. Which is why I was ecstatic that Jared was retiring.

“I’m fine,” I lied. “I just feel sick.”

Fallon came over and wrapped an arm around my shoulder, trying to soothe me.

“Beer, please!” Pasha shouted into the stands, and I looked to see her going over to one of the guys selling in the bleachers. “Want one?” she asked, looking back at us.

“Water,” I shot back. “Thank you.”

She brought back the drinks, and the motorcycles whipped past us, the high-pitched whir buzzing in my ears as my hair went flying.

I couldn’t look.

“And you know”—I continued talking to Pasha—“as well as I do that he’ll jump in for a sporadic race here and there. He’s still so young. He’ll want to do this again.”

“You both are coming home next week, right?” Jax asked, looking away from the race at me.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “We’re driving. We should be in by Thursday.”

It was summer break, and although I had lots to do to get ahead for my classes, we were excited to head home and relax with our family and friends.

“Good.” He looked back at the race but kept talking. “I signed Jared up for some off-roading stuff at the Loop next weekend, so don’t plan too much, okay?”

I twisted up my lips. “You know Jared hates off-roading,” I reminded him. “If it’s not fast—”

“I just want him to learn the lay of the land,” he shot out, appeasing me. “Juliet and I will be off to Costa Rica in a few months, and I trust him to look in on things better than I trust anyone else.”

That’s right. I’d almost forgotten.

Jax and Juliet weren’t letting a baby slow them down. Their son would be coming on their adventures with them. Juliet had a yearlong teaching contract—which she’d delayed when she got pregnant—while Jax had secured a job with Outward Bound down there and also continued to perform computer work on the side. Legal computer work.

Jared would be keeping an eye on the Loop operations in his place when we were in town.

“I’m bringing Lucas,” Madoc told Jax. “If Jared is willing, he can take him with him off-roading. The more mentors the kid has, the better.”

I smiled, thinking of how great Lucas had it. Madoc and Fallon treated their

“little brother” like one of their own, and I had no doubt the kid had a promising future ahead of him with the support system he’d gained. He had a good mom and great friends.

“Come on!” Everyone started screaming, seeing Jared in his superflashy red-and-white racing suit, which he was forced to wear.

He tore across the finish line, and it felt like those tires were driving over my heart.

“Yes!” Jax and Madoc roared, shooting their arms into the air and then doing double high fives.

I put one hand over my heart and another over my stomach, aching from the worry.

The crowd cheered as the race ended, and I smiled, seeing Jared ignore everyone who tried to talk to him as he ran up to me, dumping his helmet on the ground.

“You see?” He lifted me in the air. “I’m always safe.”

And then he brought me down, crashing his lips to mine in a way that sent me reeling. I almost cringed, hearing cameras go off as we kissed, but I looked at it as a step up that I wasn’t in a towel this time.

He set me down, wrapping his arms around me.

“Eh”—I shrugged my shoulders—“I’m not so worried about your safety anymore,” I lied.

He raised his eyebrows. “No?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Just that you win.”

I leaned in, threading my fingers through the back of his hair and inhaling the scent of his body wash.

“And I wanted you in a good mood,” I told him. “I can’t give you happy news on an unhappy day.”

He cocked his head, looking at me, confused.

“And the prize money will help,” I continued, “since you’re the only working member in the household, and I’m about to cost you a lot of money,” I teased.

He shot me a cocky grin. “And why’s that?”

And when I leaned in to tell him why I needed him safe, why no obstacle could keep me from being happy right now, I felt his breath give way and his chest cave.

And tears immediately sprang to my eyes when he knelt down in front of everyone—cameras flashing in the background and gasps from our friends going

off around us—and kissed my stomach, saying hello to his child.

Epilogue

Tate

Seven Years Later

Fanning myself with the copy of *Newsweek*, I grunted as I bent down to pick up Dylan's shoes off the carpet.

The July heat had me so aggravated that I was tempted to staple her shoelaces to the floor if she kept dumping her belongings everywhere.

Jared was next to no help when it came to building our daughter's sense of responsibility. Yeah, she was only six years old, but we didn't want her spoiled, did we? I constantly had to remind him that she'd be a teenager someday, and then he'd be sorry.

But Dylan Trent was a daddy's girl, and heaven help him when she started wanting boyfriends and late curfews instead of candy and toys.

"Why's it so cold in here?" I heard Madoc bellow from down the hall.

I shook my head and tossed my daughter's shoes on top of the hamper in our private bathroom, shutting off the light as I left. "It's hot as hell," I grumbled under my breath so he couldn't hear.

I took a long look around the room, finally satisfied that it was clean and the laundry was put away. I knew Madoc and Fallon didn't care about messes, but I did when I was staying in someone else's house.

I pulled Jared's long-sleeved blue-and-white pinstripe dress shirt away from my chest and continued fanning cool air down through the opening at the neck as I sat down on the edge of our bed. His mom had bought him a bunch of stylish Brooks Brothers dress shirts for his business trips, but he'd wear only the black or white ones. The blue- and pink-striped ones were mine, and they, along with my cotton pajama shorts, were my uniform these days.

Madoc pulled up outside my bedroom door, scowling at me with his hands on his hips.

"It's cold in here," he accused, eyeing me as the culprit, since I was the one

burning up these days and keeping his house at subzero temperatures.

I let out a fake sympathetic sigh as I continued fanning myself. “Don’t make your problems my problems, man,” I replied sarcastically.

He’d just gotten back from his office in Chicago and was still dressed in his black pinstripe suit pants and white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His silver tie hung loose around his neck, which always looked like it had been yanked to near death by the time he got home every day.

Madoc loved his job, but it was also hard on him. Going against the grain, he’d decided to work in the public sector, putting away the criminals his father worked to keep free. You would think it would be hard on their relationship, but actually, both Caruthers men thrived on the “game,” as they called it. I think going head-to-head in the courtroom or conference room brought them closer together.

He rolled his eyes at me and then shot me a snarky little look as his eyes raked up and down my body. “Does Jared tell you how hot you are even though you’re overweight?”

I straightened. “I’m not overweight. I’m pregnant.”

“Nice try.” He sneered. “But you only have one kid in there.”

I flung the magazine at him just as he ducked back into the hall.

Splaying my hand across my stomach, I huffed a breath. *Jerk.*

Being a doctor, I knew what an acceptable weight gain was during pregnancy, and I was in fantastic shape, thank you very much.

Madoc shot his head around the corner again. “Jared’s on video chat, by the way,” he chirped. And then he was gone.

I smiled, loving the sound of those words. I put my arm behind me to push myself up off the bed.

Being nearly nine months pregnant with my second child, I agreed with Jared that I shouldn’t be at our house—the house I grew up in—alone with Dylan. Since Fallon was taking a year off from her work at an architectural firm in the city to nurture some independent projects she wanted to explore, she was the perfect babysitter if I “decided” to go into labor ahead of schedule. With Jared away for several days, he didn’t want to take any chances.

I waddled down the stairs, the weight in my stomach making my legs and back ache. I once again vowed to myself that this was the last time I was going to be pregnant.

I’d made the same promise to myself after Dylan, but Jared and I knew how lonely being an only child could be, so we decided to have another. Of course,

he'd had his brother, Jax, but that wasn't until later.

I heard growling somewhere in the house and footfalls above, and I looked up, knowing who it was. I was going to have to go up to the third floor after the call with Jared and get the kids under control. Madoc's twin sons, Hunter and Kade, had Dylan bouncing off the walls these days. Fallon and Addie had run out for groceries, and I was hoping Madoc was upstairs trying to reel the kids in.

With Quinn here, too, the house was a den of madness and noise today.

Pulling out the chair at the kitchen table, I sat down in front of the laptop.

Jared smiled at me. "Hey, babe."

My stomach fluttered. "Hi." I smiled back, loving his wrinkled white dress shirt, messy hair, and loose necktie. "God, you look good," I teased, ready to eat him with a side of fries.

Someone in the background gave him a clipboard to sign, and he glared at me as he took it. "Don't start with me," he warned. "I've been craving you like crazy. I'm tired, hungry, and horny, and I can't wait to get on that plane tonight."

"Shhhh . . ." I laughed, looking around for Madoc and the kids. "This house is full of people. You can talk dirty to me later," I told him.

Jared was in California, and from the view of the background with large crates and forklifts, he was in his warehouse. He had an office there, which Pasha normally ran, but he had to make visits every few months for meetings and quality-control checks for JT Racing—JT standing for Jared and Tate, as I later discovered.

He stood at a table with the bustle of the warehouse behind him, and I couldn't get enough. Even at thirty, my husband was hot.

Hotter, actually. Why did men age so well?

"So how's my son?" Jared handed the clipboard back to the guy at his side and looked at me with his full attention.

"Sitting defiantly on my bladder," I joked, patting my belly. "Other than that, he's doing well."

"And you're in the clear?" he asked. "The hospital has all of your appointments covered?"

"Yes." I nodded. "My full attention is on my family for the next few months."

I'd only recently gone on maternity leave, since the hospital was shorthanded. But as we were getting down to the wire now, I was glad when they finally took on extra staff. Now I could take my time off without worry.

Screeching hit my ears, and I winced as I twisted around, seeing Kade and

Hunter chasing Dylan with a—I squinted my eyes—was that a plunger?

Dylan swerved around the island, her soft brown hair bouncing over her shoulders as she hurried away from their advance.

She crashed into my side, clearly seeking cover, and I put an arm around her.

The boys—both six—ran up and pulled to a halt, glowering down at her.

“Leave me alone!” she shouted, kicking out her right foot to keep them at bay.

Kade held up the plunger, and I shot my hand out as Dylan screamed. “Oh, no you don’t. Put it down,” I ordered him.

Just then, Madoc ran in, breathing hard and looking pissed.

“Madoc!” Jared barked, jutting out his pointer finger. “You keep your sons away from my kid. I mean it.”

Madoc’s eyes rounded. “Keep *them* away?” he said, surprised. “Your little . . .,” he gritted through his teeth but then stopped.

Stepping up to cover Dylan’s ears, he whispered to Jared, “I love her. I absolutely do, but she’s a viper, dude,” he growled low. “She filled her water gun with toilet water and was shooting them with it!”

Jared snorted and twisted away to laugh.

I rolled my eyes and jerked my head, telling Madoc to take his madmen elsewhere.

This was a classic example of how Jared and Madoc parented. Neither one would ever admit that their kid could do any wrong. Madoc took as much pride in his sons as Jared did in Dylan.

And I’d warned Jared about not laughing at her antics in front of her. It only encouraged the behavior.

No matter how funny it was. Or how much the twins probably deserved it.

I pulled Dylan up onto my lap, her little yellow Chucks rubbing against my shins. “Hi, Daddy,” she chirped. “I miss you.”

I smiled at her sweet little voice, loving her rosy cheeks and big smile.

“Hey, Blue Eyes,” he greeted her back. “I’ve got some surprises for you.”

“Jared,” I groaned, my ass starting to shoot daggers up my spine from the hard chair. “Honey, her room is full of your surprises. Less is more, okay?”

He shot me his cocky little grin like I should know better.

He always incurred extra fees for overweight baggage on his return trips. Always due to the presents he brought her. T-shirts, snow globes, stuffed animals, autographed pictures from drivers he worked with . . . the list went on.

She was outgrowing her room.

My old room.

“Madoc!” I heard a shout and turned to see Lucas coming through the sliding glass doors from the pool with a Gatorade in hand and Quinn with her arms wrapped around his waist.

Dylan and her daddy chatted as I watched Madoc walk back into the kitchen.

But Lucas shot off his mouth before he could say anything. “Dude, get your sister off me, please.”

Quinn tightened her arms around Lucas, and I smiled at how much grief she’d been giving him lately. At twenty, Lucas had no patience for an eight-year-old with a crush.

“I love Lucas,” she said, giggling. “I’m going to marry him.”

“The hell you are!” He looked down at her with intolerance . . . and maybe a little fear, too. “Dude, seriously,” he urged Madoc. “It’s creepy.”

“Come on.” Madoc leaned down and pulled his sister off Lucas’s body. “You’re going to make Lucas run back to college.” He nudged her toward us. “Your mommy and daddy will be here soon. Go say hi to Jared.”

Quinn—with her mother’s chocolate eyes and her father’s blond hair—came over and saluted Jared and then grabbed Dylan’s hand, both of them running back outside.

Her relationship with Jared was one of few words. I think Quinn was closest to Madoc. She saw him more. And she had a lot of fun with Jax.

But I think she was a little nervous around Jared. She looked for his approval and respect, even though her worry was unnecessary.

Jared was in awe of her.

He may not have been as easygoing as Madoc, but he loved teaching her things, and he made sure we were at every one of her recitals and birthday parties.

“Did Jax say when he and Juliet would be home this summer?” I asked, finally alone with Jared.

“Baby, I lose track of what country they’re in.” He sighed. “Bhutan or Bangladesh or—”

“Brazil,” I heard Madoc chime in from the refrigerator, where his head was buried.

I snapped my fingers. “Brazil. You were close,” I teased Jared. “It was something with a B.”

“I wish he’d just stay home.” Jared looked aggravated. “I’d like to know my nephew more than by just pictures.”

“Soon,” I appeased him, looking over to the wall in the kitchen with family photos. Jax was sitting in front of a waterfall, his head facing toward the camera, with Juliet hugging his back, both of them dirty and sweaty and smiling.

And sitting, hugging Juliet’s back, was their son, Hawke, now seven.

“I’ll call him today,” I told Jared. “The house needs to be prepared.”

Jax and Juliet had finally decided to settle back down in Shelburne Falls in Jared’s old house next door to ours. It had been almost nonstop travel and work for them with nonprofit organizations setting up schools all over the world for the past several years. Hawke didn’t slow them down, either. When he was one, they carried him in their backpacks. Now he sped ahead, carving out the trail before them.

However, they’d become more and more homesick and were determined for us all to raise our children together. Hawke loved his cousin Dylan and wanted to get to know Madoc’s boys more.

So they were coming home, and Fallon, Addie, and I were taking it upon ourselves to get the house ready, since it hadn’t been cleaned in forever and needed to get stocked with food. All I worried about now was keeping a good eye on Dylan trying to make use of the tree to go hang out with her cousin.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and puffed out my shirt, trying to get air in.

“I can’t wait until he’s born.” I groaned, talking about our son. “I’m dying to get back on your bike. I miss the wind.”

Jared leaned down on his elbows, his eyes smirking at me. “Me, too,” he whispered. “We need a date night. And soon.”

I fanned myself harder, thinking about our last date night. Jared and I jumped each other any chance we got, but once in a while we made time for just the two of us to get out for the night away from the house. It usually ended with us in the backseat of his car.

Some things never changed.

The sliding glass door opened behind me again, and I heard Dylan. “Kade, do you want to go swimming?”

I turned around to see Madoc’s son walk off away from her. “Leave me alone,” he snarled. “I don’t hang with girls.”

Her eyes fell, and my heart broke a little. I was about to go to her, but Hunter—Madoc’s other son—came up behind her. “I’ll go swimming with you,”

he offered.

She paused and then offered a little smile with a nod, taking one last look toward the hallway where Kade had disappeared before following Hunter back outside.

I knew Lucas was out there with them, so I didn't worry.

I shook my head at Jared and breathed out a laugh. "You do realize that Hawke, Kade, Hunter, Dylan, and Quinn will all be in high school at the same time, right?" I said, foreseeing a very tumultuous future ahead of us. "For at least two years out of the four?" I reminded him.

Quinn was the oldest at eight. Hawke was a year behind her, and Dylan, Kade, and Hunter were only a year behind him.

"Relax." He grabbed his jacket and slipped it on. "I don't think anyone can get in as much trouble as we did."

Looking at him, I mused about all the years of ups and downs and how much crap we'd both put each other through.

We got into so much trouble.

High school would've been more fun for me if I'd met Jared's challenge sooner, but who knows? Maybe we wouldn't be here otherwise. I wouldn't trade any of it, because no matter what happened before or what would come next, I would always choose him.

Jared was my home.

My throat ached as I swallowed. "I'll love you forever, Jared Trent," I whispered, my eyes pooling with tears.

He reached out and ran a finger down the computer screen, and I knew he was tracing my face.

"And I've loved you forever, Tatum Trent."

THE END

Dear Reader,

Jared, Tate, Madoc, Fallon, Jaxon, and Juliet represent a piece of who I am. I put so much of my heart into creating them, and they are not imaginary to me. It's a difficult good-bye, but then I guess most good-byes are.

The characters of the Fall Away series all represent a confused time in our lives when making fast choices is easier than living with them. Now, as adults, we understand that even though adolescence is hard, making mistakes is necessary.

Parents, teachers, and mentors try to keep us on the right track and steer us away from poor decisions, but without those hard lessons, we don't grow. The Fall Away couples were meant to remind us of that.

My only hope is that you've come out of this series knowing that everyone has a story, mistakes are inevitable, and life goes on.

Embrace your imperfections. Their lessons make you better.

None of us are unique in our suffering. But we are unique in our survival.

I am forever grateful that you've given me a forum in which to share some of my own life lessons, which I had to learn the hard way, and I cannot tell you how much your words of encouragement have meant to me.

While the journeys of Jared, Tate, Madoc, Fallon, Jax, and Juliet will now continue off the written page, you may have noticed that I left a finger in the book, so that it doesn't close completely. I may explore their children's stories someday. There are no plans to do this, but I'm interested in leaving the possibility open.

For now, though, other stories are wanting a life of their own, and I hope you continue to read my work long into the future. The adventures are just beginning.

Thank you for reading these books. Thank you for giving me a chance to be in your lives. And thank you for joining me on this journey.

Love,
Penelope

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Penelope Douglas was born in Dubuque, Iowa. She earned a bachelor's degree in Public Administration, then a master's of science in education at Loyola University in New Orleans. She and her husband have one daughter and reside in Las Vegas.