



Rekindled Love

Cape Cove Book Three

Harper Monroe

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Important Note

This isn't a dark romance, so there aren't any graphic scenes. But...there is a situation within this story that could potentially be triggering to some readers. I want you to be aware beforehand because your mental health matters.

Playlist

Jelly Roll- Need A Favor

Whiskey Myers- Stone

Kameron Marlowe- Giving You Up

Aerosmith- Janie's Got A Gun

Def Leppard- Pour Some Sugar On Me

Chainsmokers- Closer

Five Finger Death Punch- Wrong Side Of Heaven

Gone West- I'm Never Getting Over You

AC/DC- Back In Black

Falling In Reverse- The Drug In Me Is You

My Breed, Jesse Howard- Welcome To My House

Miguel- Sure Thing

Slander, Dylan Matthew- Love Is Gone

Harry Styles- Falling

Post Malone- I Fall Apart

Morgan Wallen- Last Night

Jamie Lawson- Don't Let Me Let You Go

Lainey Wilson- Dirty Looks

Ozzy Osbourne- Mama I'm Coming Home

Ruelle, Fleurie- Carry You

Bad Omens- Just Pretend

Ed Sheeran- Eyes Closed

David J- Before You

SYML- Better

Eric Ethridge- If You Met Me First

To all of you that didn't know me but took a chance anyway.

Thank you!

Quote

If you love somebody, let them go, for if they return, they were always yours. If they don't, they never were.

-Khalil Gibran



Prologue

LAWSON

Dad said his girlfriend and her daughter are moving in with us today. I haven't even met these people he's letting take over our house. Mom only left three months ago, why isn't he trying to get her back? I don't want some girl living with me. I hate girls! Girls are gross and have cooties! She better not have a bunch of pink stuff and want me to play dolls with her. Over my dead body will I play with a doll. Why couldn't it be a boy? At least he would want to throw a football around. I'm going to be stuck with a yucky girl and all of her girly stuff. This is going to be terrible! How can Dad do this to me?

"Lawson, come down here. They're here," Dad yells from the bottom of the staircase. Huffing and rolling my eyes, I stomp out of my room and down the stairs. Dad puts his hand on my back and mumbles, "I expect you to be on your best behavior and make them feel welcome." I'll make them feel welcome when they get a taste of my pranks. I'm the prank master! Dad doesn't care for them and most of the time gets mad, but Mom, she loves them and always laughs.

I stand frozen in front of the prettiest girl I have ever seen. I haven't seen a lot of girls, I'm only six and still in kindergarten, but out of all the ones I have seen this girl is the prettiest.

I blink and blink to make sure I'm not seeing things. She looks like an angel with the sun shining all around her and she's wearing a pink dress. Pink is my new favorite color. Her hair is blonde and hangs down to her elbows. Her eyes are the color of Emerald City from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. That's Mom's favorite movie, she would always make me watch it with her.

The girl stares back at me, her big eyes blinking just like mine. "I'm Brinley." She sticks her hand straight out in front of her.

"I'm Lawson." I hold her hand in mine and slowly shake. My hand is tingly in hers. Those tingles shoot up my arm and straight to my heart that's thumping in my chest. Her big round eyes stare at our joined hands that we're still shaking like she feels the same thing I am.

She starts giggling, even her laugh sounds like angels singing. Maybe it won't be so bad having this girl live here, but no other girls. "Lawson, this is my doll, her name is Fiona." I didn't even see her holding the green doll that looks like Fiona from *Shrek*.

"Hi, Fiona." What am I doing talking to a doll? Brinley giggles harder, my lips lift into a beaming smile.

"Do you want to play?"

My head moves up and down fast. I probably look like an idiot to her, but I can't help it. Something has happened to me from when I was in my room until now. Maybe Dad should take me to the doctor to make sure there's nothing wrong with me. "I'll show you your room and then we can go outside or play dolls. Whatever you want to do." What am I saying?

I hear Dad and Brinley's mom whispering about us already getting along so well. We're going to get along fine because I guess I will do whatever this girl wants me to do just so I can be near her, even play with dolls.



Chapter One

BRINLEY

I stare up at the historic brownstone building that was built in 1872, the two levels of cement stairs I will climb every day for the next four years of my life, the four stories of windows that let sunlight beam into the rooms. If it wasn't for my grandparents, I wouldn't even be attending college right now. They set up a college fund for me the day I was born. My mother would never do that for me. Nanna and Pawpaw put enough money in that account I won't have to worry about paying any costs that financial aid and grants won't cover. I also have enough extra money to get by with until I find a job.

Shifting my feet, I adjust the gigantic box of my belongings I have propped against my hip. "We're a long way from home, aren't we?" Fisher throws his arm around my shoulders while grasping the handle on my luggage with his free hand.

"Yeah, we are." We've been living in Massachusetts for the last two months, specifically Harbor, Massachusetts. It's a college town run by locals, much like Cape Cove, but ten times the size of our hometown. I miss home. I miss our friends, Sammi mostly because I worry about her constantly. I

know she has Maddox now and he's the best to her, but we've never been apart this long except when she was sick and in treatment for nine months. It was torture not having my best friend with me for almost a year. How am I going to make it four years without her? When we were little girls, I might have been playing with Lawson or spending time with him, but Sammi and I were still best friends.

"Come on, let's get you all settled in your new living quarters." I've been renting an Airbnb since we arrived in Harbor. I refused to live with Fisher and Lawson in their apartment. It was bad enough being in a car with Lawson for three days on the trip here, no way could I live under the same roof with him.

As we step inside the entrance it looks like a commons area. I see a few girls sitting on one of the black leather couches quietly talking amongst themselves. Other than that, it's relatively quiet. Not surprising since there's still a month before classes begin. I came early with Fisher and Lawson, so I could do early admissions and wouldn't have to drive the few days it took to get here by myself. "I'm on the fourth floor, room 414."

We search for an elevator, but apparently there isn't one because all we find is a staircase. "Jesus, girl! If I'm going to be coming to visit you, I'm going to need to get in shape for this shit. You think Lawson would let me come with him to some of those football practices?" We're both breathing heavily by the time we make it to the top floor. It isn't easy

when you're lugging around a bunch of crap with you and trying to tackle stairs as well.

"You and I both know the only thing that would get a workout are your eyes from checking out all those asses in those tight football pants."

"You ain't lyin'." Fisher chuckles.

"Here it is. Room 414." I notice the door isn't shut all the way. "Hello?"

The door swings open, a girl with iron straight shoulder-length dark chocolate hair, bright, amber-colored eyes, and a beaming white smile stands in the doorway. "Hey, y'all!"

"Hey, I'm Brinley Ryan..."

She interrupts me. "Oh my gosh! You're my roomie! Come on in!" She has a strong southern accent. "I'm Kenzi Buckley, it's nice to meet you. Your bed is over there." She throws her thumb over her shoulder to the right side of the room. She's already made up the left with black and white photos of horses, sunsets, and a farmhouse. Her bed is covered in cowhide print and a western themed blanket folded at the foot of the bed.

"It's nice to meet you too." I set the box I have been carrying on the edge of the mattress. Fisher pushes my luggage to the end of my bed. "This is my friend, Fisher Riley."

"Nice to meet you too, Fisher."

"Back atcha, Kenzi." He twirls his finger in a circle. "Love the whole country vibe you have going on here."

She bounces on her heels. “Thanks. I’m from a small town in Tennessee. Country’s always been my way of living until now. This place is so different than back home.”

I nod. “It is for us too. We’re from a small town in California.”

“Wow, California. Y’all are a long way from home.” Kenzi steps toward a closed door and opens it. “I left half the closet empty for you, and we have a mini fridge over there.” In front of the only window in our room sits a desk, beside it is the smallest refrigerator I have ever seen. “Why don’t we finish getting our room ready and we can talk about any pet peeves or rules we have.” She winks at me. “I got a good feeling about you, Brinley, I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Smiling, I reply. “I think so too.” Kenzi exudes nice southern charm and is overly friendly. Nothing about her gives me psycho vibes, but I never had suspicions about our ex-friend Dani either. Even though I have a good feeling about Kenzi I think I will keep her at a distance until I can fully trust her.

Picking up my luggage, I throw it onto the mattress and unzip it while Fisher sits on the bed. “So, Kenzi, what’s your story?” You have to love Fisher’s curiosity. He’s probably just as concerned as I am and curious to see if she will tell us about herself. Dani sure didn’t.

“I don’t have much of a story. I grew up in this farmhouse.” She points to the picture hanging on the wall. “We were raised to help Mama and Daddy on the farm, taking care of the

animals, bailing hay, gathering eggs from the chicken coop for morning breakfast.”

“We?” I question.

She beams with pride. “I have two younger brothers, Noah and Brooks. When they were little, they couldn’t say my name, so they called me Kizzy. It stuck and since then that’s what everyone calls me back home. Those are my horses.” She taps another photo on the wall.

I get the last of my clothes hung and start on my stuff in the box. I use thumb tacks to hang pictures of all of us back home.

“Brin!” Fisher screeches.

“What?” I snap my eyes to his, his mouth hangs open.

“You cut Lawson out of all your pictures?”

“Yep. I am not staring at his face every day. I can only hope I don’t have to see him around campus. I don’t know why he came to this college anyway. He could have chosen one of the other colleges that offered him a scholarship to play football. But oh no he had to choose this one.” I elongate the last sentence while rolling my eyes. I know why he chose this college, because we said we would always follow each other no matter where we went. I just don’t understand why he would stick to our pact when he did what he did to me. He knows I don’t want him here but came anyway. I just have to keep the hope of not seeing him.

Kenzi waves her hands in front of her. “Wait, who is Lawson?” She bounces on her bed.

“He used to be my stepbrother and now he’s...my enemy.”

Fisher mirrors her with flapping hands and his ass bouncing on my bed. Great, they’re like two teen girls getting ready to gossip about some juicy soap opera drama. “There is so much more to it than that! You’ll want to sit down for this one, Kenzi.” I can already see they’re going to be besties in no time.

“Fisher!” I grumble.

“Keep putting your shit away. I got this. So... in kindergarten Brin’s mom started dating Lawson’s dad. In first grade they got married. Brin and Lawson were inseparable and never considered each other as stepsiblings. Everything was gravy until sixth grade when their parents got divorced. Lawson and Brin were already head over heels in love, but you know they couldn’t be boyfriend and girlfriend because of the whole parents being married part. Anyway, when the divorce happened, they told Brin and Lawson they couldn’t even speak to each other anymore. They ripped them apart. Lawson’s dad remarried his mom and then something happened in high school between them that has made Brin absolutely loathe Lawson.”

Kenzi looks absolutely enthralled by Fisher’s retelling of my life. “Well, what happened?”

“No one knows but those two.” He tilts his head in my direction. “This one is going to take that to the grave with her.”

“Lawson, he’s here at this college?”

Fisher nods. “Yep. He followed her here.”

She covers her chest with her hands. “Oh, my heart. It’s like a star-crossed lovers story that shouldn’t happen, but their story isn’t done, and you’re just waiting to see the end of the movie.” She falls back on her bed and cries. “Don’t leave us with a cliffhanger, B!”

I huff, glaring at Fisher. “There is no cliffhanger because our story is most certainly done! He can go jump off a cliff for all I care. Number one rule. Lawson Beck’s name will never be mentioned in this room again.”

Kenzi bites her lip while smirking. “Okay, but like outside of this room—“

“No!”

Fisher howls with laughter. “I knew I liked you.”

“Fisher,” my eyes widen and lips purse while I snap my head side to side, “needs to stop being a gossip queen.”

I finally got all my pictures hung and my bed covered with my turquoise and chocolate bedding. I hug Fisher goodbye and fall onto my bed. “Are you hungry? I’m starving.”

“Yes!” Kenzi jumps up and grabs her phone off the desk. “I’ll order a pizza and have it delivered. We can eat and get those pet peeves and rules out of the way.”

“Sounds great to me. Pepperoni is my favorite.”

“Mine too!”



Chapter Two

LAWSON

These college football practices are fucking brutal. I leave my apartment before the sun rises and get home not long before it sets. Cardio training, weight training, on field training. High school practices were nothing compared to this. *Fuck!* I'm exhausted day in and day out, but it's all going to be worth it if I make a spot to play, right?

"Beck, what are you doing? Gentry was wide open!" Coach Patterson yells from the sidelines. He throws his clipboard onto the ground. "You better start practicing like you got some sense, boy, or your ass will be warming the bench all season!"

Someone slaps my shoulder. "Don't worry about him. We've all taken the brunt of his anger." Trevor Kendrick, our quarterback, stands next to me.

"Thanks."

"Run the play again, Kendrick. Show the newbie how it's done."

"Sure thing, Coach." Kendrick takes my spot. "Red 62. Red 62, set, hut!" He shouts the play. The ball snaps back

beautifully, scanning the field, he finds Gentry on the twenty-yard line, and throws the pass. Gentry catches the ball, running into the end zone. “That’s how it’s done, Rookie.” Kendrick slaps my shoulder once again. “Don’t beat yourself up too bad. We all have our off days, besides I have no plans of letting you play this season.” His lips tilt up letting me know he’s just giving me a hard time. He jogs backwards. “You’re not in high school anymore, Beck. We’re bigger, quicker, we fight hard and play harder.” He lifts his arms into the air. “This here’s the real deal.”

Real deal that I’m fucking up.

I grab an ice-cold bottle of water out of the refrigerator and plop down on the opposite end of the couch as Fisher. He’s watching a movie on our flatscreen. Unscrewing the lid off my water, I take a long drink then run my hand through my short brown hair. “She get all unpacked?”

“Yep, I met her new roommate, Kenzi. She seems nice.”

“Seems nice? Dani seemed nice too but look how that turned out. Just watch out for Brin, okay?”

Truth is, I’m jealous of Fisher. It was always supposed to be me helping Brin unpack and get settled in at college. I’m the one that was supposed to help her decorate her dorm room and meet her roommate. It’s my own fault I fucked it all up, I know that. Now, I have to resort to asking him questions and living vicariously through him. It could have been different if she would have just accepted one of my million goddamn apologies. Brin will never do that though.

He swivels on the couch to face me and grabs a pillow, putting it on his lap. "You should be the one watching out for her not me."

My eyes cut to his. "Yeah, well...she'll never let that happen. She can't even stand to be around me."

"Maybe you should," he lifts his hand and pinches his thumb and finger together while scrunching his face, "bring down your pride and stubbornness just a tad."

Pointing at my chest, I gawk at him flabbergasted. "Me? You think I'm the stubborn one?" My tone rises with growing frustration. "I tried with her all last fucking year, or did that slip your mind?"

Brin is the most stubborn girl you could ever know. Once you hurt her it'll take a miracle for her to forgive you, if she ever does. I hurt her worse than anyone else, even worse than the day her dad broke his promise and didn't show up.

I open the front door seeing her sitting on the first step of our porch, her face is buried in her hands and her shoulders are shaking. Brin's been waiting hours for her dad to come get her. He promised he would be here. My nails dig into my palms because of how tight my hands are fisted. I let the screen door close behind me as I walk down the steps and sit beside her. I put my arm around her shoulders and pull her closer, hugging her tightly. "It's going to be okay, Brin."

Her head shakes against my chest. "No, it's not, Law. He broke his promise! I will never forgive him for this!"

I can't believe he would do this to her. There have been more than a few times he made excuses not to come see her, but he's gotten worse about not showing up since my dad married her mom this year. That's why Brin made him promise he would be here this time.

"You still have me, Brin, you know I would never break a promise to you."

She lifts her head, staring at me through her water-filled eyes. The corners of her lips lift. "You'll never leave me, right? We'll always be best friends and never break promises and always be here for each other, right?"

I nod. "Right."

She shoves her pinky in my face. "Pinky promise."

"Pinky promise." I repeat her words then wrap my pinky around hers. I seal it with a kiss to our fingers, she mimics me. "Now, our deal is unbreakable."

"Unbreakable," she agrees, her face lights up, and the sight sends my heart on a thudding rampage.

Shit, we were like seven then, but Brin wouldn't even so much as speak to her dad for months. It took another year before she finally agreed to let him pick her up. He did good for a while, but eventually old habits resurfaced, and he stopped showing up again. He's a fucking worthless, pathetic piece of shit that never deserved her love or time. Last I knew he moved away, remarried and started a new family. I was the

one there holding, comforting, and drying her tears after she was left in the dust and forgotten.

“No, it didn’t slip my mind.” Fisher’s voice pulls me away from my thoughts. “I just think you could try a little harder.” He shrugs his shoulder. “Brin is a girl, and they love big grand gestures. Figure something out.”

I groan. “Some grand gesture isn’t going to work on Brin. Don’t forget I know her better than anyone.”

He wags his fingers in front of me. “No. No, my friend, you knew her better than anyone. You need to get to know who she is now. Not the little girl that was your stepsister.”

Rolling my eyes, I rest my head on the back of the couch while staring at the ceiling. “What do you suggest, oh wise one? And don’t call her my stepsister.”

“That’s for you to figure out. Now, I have a more pressing situation here. I need you to take me to these football practices with you.”

My head snaps in his direction with furrowed brows. “For what?”

“Because I have never worked out a day in my life and let me tell you I was fucking exhausted climbing all those dang stairs to her dorm room.” He covers his face with the pillow and cries. “I’m out of shape, Lawson.”

Chuckling, I stand up. “You’re not out of shape and no I’m not taking you with me. I’m going to shower and go to bed. Night, Fisher.”

“Fine,” he whines. “When they find my body on those stairs it’s going to be all your fault.” He huffs, “Good night, Lawson.”

Shaking my head, I walk away, mumbling, “You’re so dramatic.”



Chapter Three

BRINLEY

I decided to stroll around campus and check everything out. The campus is miles wide with all the different buildings, it's beautiful seeing the historic architecture. I will never understand how the grass is so perfectly green everywhere. I envision myself sitting under one of the old oak trees reading a book or studying. Goldfish swim in the small pond that's surrounded by gorgeous flowers and stone benches. This isn't home, but I can't imagine a better, more peaceful location to spend the next four years.

As I'm walking past the bookstore, I notice a sign on Washmore Café's window that says help wanted. The outside is cute, whitewashed brick with a striped awning above the door in the university colors, white and red. I step inside, the lyrics of "Need A Favor" by Jelly Roll softly plays. This café would be the perfect study spot or place to hang out with friends.

The walls are the same whitewashed brick as the outside. To the left are long rectangular tables set up with computers for customers to use along with smaller round ones for dining, all

black tabletops and red chairs. To the right, separated by a half-partitioned wall, are soft plush looking couches matching the black and red aesthetic. This café has a modern feel yet is warm and cozy, welcoming. The main focus of this space is the menu hanging from the ceiling by silver chains and underneath is the ordering counter complete with a cash register and a display case of pastries that look delicious.

“Welcome to Washmore Café, how can I help you?” Startled, I spin around, and I’m eye level with a broad chest. Where did he come from? Was I so engrossed in this place I didn’t notice someone behind me? My gaze slowly roams upward to a light-colored groomed beard, full pink lips, a straight pointed nose, and whiskey eyes. He’s gorgeous.

“Hi! I uh...I saw the sign that you’re hiring.” *Get it together, Brin. He’s going to think you’re an idiot by the way you’re stumbling over your words.*

“I’m Dean.” He holds his hand out for me to shake.

“I’m Brinley.”

His lips quirk showcasing his perfect white teeth. “Nice to meet you, Brinley. Follow me and I’ll get you an application.” He bends down behind the ordering station. I only see the top of his sandy blond head until he pops back up with a paper and pen. “Fill this out.” He passes the pen and paper across the stainless-steel countertop.

I fill in as many of the questions as I can, but I’m a little nervous when it asks my previous job experience. I don’t have any experience; this would be my first job ever. A few minutes

later, I announce, “Finished.” Dean stops grinding coffee beans and turns to face me. “Do I wait for the owner or manager to give me a call?”

I’m not sure about the proper etiquette when you’re looking for a job. I was fortunate that Nanna and Pawpaw wanted me to focus on getting good grades and being a kid instead of working plus going to school. But now that I’m in college I’m on my own here. I need to be an adult and be responsible for myself.

He holds his finger up. “I think they might already be here. Let me go check.”

He disappears around the partitioned wall. I can’t help but admire the way his ass fits in those denim jeans he’s wearing. He is a seriously good-looking guy.

“Hello, Miss Ryan, it says you’re from Cape Cove, California. I’m Dean, owner of Washmore Café, nice to meet you.”

My mouth drops open, cheeks flaming with embarrassment. “You’re the owner?” Oh my God! I was checking out my potential boss. Kill me now!

Dean chuckles. “I’m just messing with you, Brinley, I am the owner, but I’m not one of those tight ass bosses. I like to joke around and make work fun. Are you attending Washmore University?”

I expel the breath I was holding and lightly laugh. “Yes, I’m a freshman.”

His whiskey eyes lock with my green orbs. “You left your previous employment history blank.”

I bite my lip nervously and nod. “If you hire me this would be my first job.”

“Are you okay with part-time hours?”

“That would actually be perfect. I’m going to have a full class schedule.”

Dean asks more questions, by the time we’re done my palms are sweaty and my heart races anxiously. This job would be perfect for me. I wouldn’t have to worry about finding rides since I left my car in Cape Cove. The hours would still give me enough time to study and keep my grades up.

It’s quiet between us for a few moments as he continues checking over my application. He taps the pen against the counter. “Well, Brinley, I usually tell people I will go over their application and give them a call, but I like you. I think you’ll work out great here. You can start Monday at eleven in the morning, we’ll have you trained and ready to go by the time all the students return. It’ll be slow up until that point and then it gets pretty busy.”

“You’re giving me the job?” I squeal with excitement. “Oh my gosh, thank you!”

Dean’s lips turn up in a sexy smile. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you Monday at eleven.”

“See you Monday!”

I was going to go back to my dorm room but found myself at Washmore football stadium instead. It won't hurt anything to watch him for a few minutes, right? Climbing the bleachers, I sit all the way at the top, hoping I'm far enough away he won't see me. Pulling my earbuds out of my pocket, I open the music app on my phone. I stare down at the field while Whiskey Myers sings "Stone" to me. I don't need anyone to tell me, I already know Lawson is number nine. He always has been.

"Brin, how cool is this?" Lawson holds up his very first football jersey. It has the number nine in big block numbers on the back. We're only in fourth grade, so he's playing flag football. He's not old enough to play tackle yet, but I have no doubt he will once he's able to. He will be the best player there ever was. Lawson has been obsessed with the sport for as long as he could pick up a ball. Or so that's what he says.

"That's awesome, Law!" I beam proudly and wrap my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

He clings to me just as tightly. "When we're in high school, I'm going to be the quarterback and you'll be head cheerleader. We'll rule the school together!"

"And after we graduate, we'll go off to college together."

Lawson lifts me off my feet, he spins us around and around. "That's right, Brin. We'll never be apart."

A tear slides down my cheek. God, we had so many dreams but look at us now. I hate him. I swear I do and it fucking hurts. But you know what hurts worse than anything? Still

loving him, still having the memories of what we used to be, having the memories of broken promises, lies, and words that cut deep. That hurts worse than anything in this world. I wish I could shut off my mind and forget Lawson ever existed. If I could do that, then I could forget what it feels like to be destroyed by the person I loved with my entire being, the person who consumed every part of me.

I want to let him go and the years of memories. I need to let him go. I'm in fucking college now, this was going to be my fresh start. I was going to be free of Cape Cove and all the heartbreak he caused me. Why should I still let him affect me? Why should I keep harping on the past when I have this new life ahead of me?

Starting now, from this day forward, Lawson Beck will no longer hold me back from being happy. I refuse to let him keep this control over me. My heart, mind, and soul will be free of the boy who owned me. Lawson Beck will be nothing to me, nothing more than the stranger he became years ago.

Standing up, I take one stair at a time back down as Kameron Marlowe's "Giving You Up" filters through my earbuds. Glancing at the field one last time, I'm drawn to him by an invisible pull. Lawson's frozen, staring directly at me the same as I am him. The same as we were the first day we met.

Turning my back on him, I leave the stadium. Today, I am done with the past. Today, I am moving forward and moving

on. There's nothing or no one that's going to stop me from living my best life here at college.



Chapter Four

LAWSON

Seeing Brin sitting in those bleachers watching my practice is something I never thought I would see again. She hasn't watched me play since sixth grade before our parents' divorce. She was my biggest cheerleader and the one person I always looked for before, during, and after each game.

Coach blows his whistle gaining my attention and pulling me out of the trance I was under. "Beck, break's over. I want you to run the Show 62 play."

"You got it, Coach." Getting into position, I yell the call. "Show 62, Show 62, set, hut." The ball lands perfectly in my hands. I fake the hand off to my right and find Toby Rodgers, easily passing the ball to him.

"Nice work!" Coach claps. "Run through the plays once more then do sprints."

We're dragging ass by the time we enter the locker room and hit the showers. "Hey, Beck, the team is going out tonight, you should join us."

“Where you going?” I ask Kendrick while drying off.

“A bar called Wiley’s. It’s outside of town, but it’s a chill place.”

I don’t know if I’m up for partying. Practice has me exhausted. Relaxing on the couch at the apartment sounds pretty damn good. “I’ll think about it.” After getting dressed, I pull my keys out of my duffel bag. Maybe I can catch a short nap then be good to go tonight.



Brin being there at practice today has been torturing me over and over in my head like a movie that just won’t stop replaying. In all those romantic ones she used to make me watch, it would have been our scene where she was leaving. I would run to her and take my helmet off. I would apologize for the millionth time; I would have told her how sorry I was for being the biggest asshole on the planet. We would have gazed into each other’s eyes, and I would have seen the moment she forgave me. Only then, I would have picked her up in my arms and given her the kiss neither of us could ever forget. But this isn’t a movie, this is our real life and there is no *would be* or *would haves* because I know she’s never going to give me that chance, but I can’t stop trying. I can’t give up; in the back of my mind, it keeps telling me she was there sitting in those bleachers watching me. Maybe just maybe one day she’ll let me in again.

Fisher informed me that Kenzi wanted to take him and Brin to a bar to celebrate Brin getting the job at Washmore Café today. After he asked around, this place seems to be the go-to bar for college students under the age of twenty-one. Wouldn't you know it, it's the same bar Kendrick invited me to. With Fisher's approval, I invited myself to this celebration under the ruse that I'm there with my team. She can't get pissed off, coincidences happen, right?

"Lawson, are you ready?" Fisher shouts from the living room. Checking my appearance once more in the mirror, I decide it'll do. I'm wearing light denim jeans and a white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to my elbows. I styled my hair with some gel to give it that messed up look and put on some of my favorite cologne that smells of citrus and spice.

Walking out of my bedroom, I reply, "Yeah, I'm ready."

He taps his foot on the hardwood floor while holding the doorknob. "You know she's going to kill me for bringing you, right?"

Grabbing my keys off the coffee table, I snort. She is going to be livid that I'm there and she's going to want to indeed kill Fisher. I can already see her pretty face burning red with anger. I smile to myself.

"Just tell Brin I came to hang with the football team and that I'm not there for her."

Fisher locks our apartment. "Like she'd ever believe that."

I apprehensively turn the steering wheel where Fisher's phone told me to go. Slowly, I keep going forward toward the rows of parked cars on the gravel lot. We pass a small white structure. I'm not even sure what the fuck to call it, it's a building, but it doesn't look like a bar would in town. The directions took us to the outskirts of Harbor, which is where Kendrick told me this place was, but he didn't say it looked like the location of a horror movie. I'm beginning to wonder if we didn't get told the wrong address.

The gravel lot is eerily dark, there are no streetlights lit or outside lights shining to help you find your way. We're solely dependent on the moonlight. This definitely doesn't look safe for women to be walking to and from at night. My gut twists with unease, I wonder if anyone has ever disappeared out here. We should have done more fucking research. The organ in my chest pounds wildly at the thought of Brin being in there. What the fuck was her roommate thinking? My pulse quickens with images of Brin being kidnapped and taken somewhere to be tied up, someone hurting her, and doing whatever sick shit they could conjure up.

The dingy white paint on the building is chipping off, looks like it hasn't been painted in more years than I've been alive. The sign above the door hangs loose and lopsided like it could fall on someone's head at any given time. "No wonder they don't give a fuck if you're twenty-one here." Fisher looks as horrified as I feel.

I peer out of my windshield, scanning our surroundings. "You sure this is the right place?"

His nose crinkles and his lips purse. “This is the address Kenzi sent me.”

“Are you sure about this girl, Fisher? I mean she could have led us out here to be murdered or some shit.” A lot of crazy shit has happened with our friends over the last year. Maybe it’s our turn dealing in the psycho department.

Fisher snickers. “Now, who’s being overdramatic? Come on, ya’ big scaredy cat. There’s plenty of cars in this lot. What’s the worst that could happen? We walk in and there’s like a whole group of bikers that look all dark and tough with their tattoos and leather vests. Who wouldn’t want to see that?” He fans his hand in front of his face like he’s suddenly hot and flustered.

“Shut the fuck up. Don’t try acting brave now when you just looked as scared as me.” I fling my door open. “Let’s go.”

Both of us glance every which way until we’re at the entrance. I open the door, then, with a wave of my hand, I usher him inside. “You first, big macho man.”

He rolls his eyes and steps over the threshold of the unknown. Going in behind him, I check out this fine establishment. Well, there isn’t a group of bikers, so we’re safe there. The place is low-lit with torn-up bench seating, scratched to hell tables along the right-side wall that’s covered in pictures, and a bar counter to the left of us. Definitely not a high-class establishment.

An older man, whose appearance would have me strongly in agreement that he could very well be a biker, is serving drinks

to customers sitting on a row of round barstools at the counter. Maybe Fisher isn't wrong after all. The man looks to be in his late fifties with a long white beard, clean shaved head, and arms covered in ink. He's wearing an old worn Harley-Davidson shirt with the sleeves cut off. He has a 'you don't want to fuck with me' aura about him. Maybe that's why underage college students can come here to drink. The cops are scared of this guy and let him do whatever the fuck he wants.

As we're walking toward the back, there's high tables against the walls and smaller tables scattered in the open space between them and a pool table. I notice a couple of the guys from the team are in fact shooting pool. That makes me relax significantly, knowing we're in the right place. A jukebox plays Aerosmith's "Janie's Got a Gun."

"Beck!" A few of my teammates bellow my last name while holding their beer bottles up in the air.

"Are you fucking serious, Fisher?" Brin storms up to us. She looks beautiful as usual. Her silky ash blonde hair flows down her back in beach waves, her makeup is done perfectly in neutral colors, and she's wearing a black crop top with bell-bottom jeans. Fuck me, her cute little belly button and smooth tanned flesh peek out between where her top ends and jeans begin. Goddamn, she's fucking sexy as hell. Her hate-filled eyes blaze with anger. "This was supposed to be my celebration and you brought him!"

Fisher's cheeks puff up with air before releasing it. He lets the half-fabricated lie roll off his tongue. "He's not here for you. He's here with the football team."

She crosses her arms over her chest. All that accomplishes is pushing her large tits up along with her top, giving me an ample view of her naked belly. The sight and her attitude shoot straight to my dick. "Right." That one word and the way she elongates it tells me she doesn't believe him. Brin turns her back on us and hollers over her shoulder, "He better stay the hell away from me."

My brow cocks, meeting Fisher's sympathetic expression. Yeah, this is going to be a real fun night. I might have a beer or two, but no way in hell am I getting drunk. Brin's going to get wasted, if something happens where she might need help, I will be there to protect her and in my right state of mind.



Chapter Five

BRINLEY

I've been watching Lawson for hours, living it up with his new football friends. Laughing, talking, dancing, playing pool, having a dandy ol' fucking time. Glaring at him over the rim of my glass, I swallow the last of my rum and Coke. It's not my preferred drink, but the owner of this bar and the one serving the drinks has very few options. Underage beggars can't be choosers, right? I'll take what I can get if it gives me a moment of reprieve from my memories.

A girl with dark hair, a thin frame, and makeup done like she's a hooker sits on Lawson's lap. My stomach twists and turns, I want to vomit seeing her so close to him. That familiar green monster rears its ugly head. I've felt it more times than I can count over the years. Jealousy is a bitch. "Look at him over there. He's such a fucking asshole. This was supposed to be my night and he ruined it." Slamming the glass onto the table, I am beyond the buzzed stage. I said earlier I am done with him and the past, but here I am letting him get to me again. I need to listen to the words I tell myself and start living my life. Fuck Lawson Beck and the girl he'll probably take home tonight.

“Don’t let him get to you, Brin.” Fisher lays his hand on my shoulder.

I point my finger into the air. “You’re the one who brought him here. I’m so pissed at you.”

Kenzi laughs at my slurring words. “Yep, I think someone’s had enough for the night.”

“Oh, I love this song!” I jump out of my seat as “Pour Some Sugar on Me” booms from the jukebox. Before anyone can stop me, I’m climbing onto the table. Lifting my arms into the air, I sway my hips matching the beat of the music and shouting the lyrics like I’m front row at a Def Leppard concert. I gain the attention of all those beefy footballers. They crowd around the table enthralled with my horrid singing and dancing skills. *Take that you asshole. You might have her attention, but I have all of theirs. I could have any one of them I wanted. If only I wanted.* Shimming lower and lower until my knees hit the table, I arch my back, and circle my hips. The chorus has everyone belting the words. I fling myself forward and roll my head, my hair flies all around me, slapping a few of my fans in the face. They don’t mind they’re all shouting and cheering me on.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Lawson’s voice carries over the music and my audience.

Splaying my hands onto the table, I’m on my hands and knees, my ass all up in the air. At least it looks good in these jeans. I lean in close to his face. “I’m celebrating!”

“Get the fuck down, Brin.” *Oh, what’s he got to be so angry about? He smells good like citrus and spice and everything nice.*

“Go the fuck back to your girlfriend, Law,” I mock, using the nickname I haven’t called him since sixth grade.

Lawson growls at me. Literally growls like he’s some kind of wildebeest. “Get down or I’ll make you get the fuck down.”

Sitting back on my knees, I lift my hands, and lightly shake them. “I’m so scared, Lawson.” I’m not backing down and he can’t tell me what to do. He lost that privilege when he tore my heart out of my chest and crushed it. “Go threaten your girlfriend.”

“Brin.” He grits my name through his clenched teeth.

Leaning toward him once more, our noses almost touching, I hiss, “Leave. Me. Alone. All I’m doing is acting like the whore you said I was. Remember that?” The rage in him intensifies, his nostrils flare, and his face burns red. With lightning speed, Lawson wraps his arms around my thighs and lifts me onto his shoulder. *How the hell did he do that so fast?*

He barrels through the crowd, my fists pound his back, and my kicking feet do nothing to stop him. “Put me down!” I scream throughout the bar.

He finally listens once we’re outside. “Why are you such a bitch?” His breaths are ragged, I don’t think it’s from the exertion of carrying me, but from his anger.

My mouth drops open on a gasp. The audacity! I point to myself with brows raised. “You think I don’t have every fucking reason to be a bitch to you?”

He looks downright terrifying with muscles flexing, fists clenched, and his jaw bunched tight. *Terrifyingly sexy*. I hate myself for even having thoughts of him like that, but I can’t help it damn it. He’s sex and sin and tempting enough to lick. *I would never! I hate him! Remember, Brin, he is the enemy!* “Goddamn it, Brin, I’ve tried apologizing a million fucking times and you won’t listen.”

“Because no amount of I’m sorrys will ever take it away!” My brows pull tight, and eyes fill with unshed tears, even as my tone calms. “Don’t you get that? I can’t ever forget or forgive you for what you did to me.”

“Tell me again, why we’re here, Sammi?” I grumble beside my best friend where we’re hiding in a corner at Trent’s party. The Chainsmokers’ “Closer” blares throughout the house. Everyone is singing the lyrics and dancing around the living room. But we’re hiding in a corner.

Sammi watches the crowd, I know that look in her eyes. She’s envious of them, she always has been, but when is she going to get it? No one at this party is ever going to be her friend. For as long as I can remember they have bullied her, done horrible things to her, called her awful names. She keeps trying to fit in, but it’s never going to happen. I was supposed to be one of them. I was supposed to be head cheerleader, Lawson was supposed to be quarterback. We were supposed to

rule Cape Cove High together. That went up in flames when our parents split. He continued to live his life playing football and became one of them while I put our dream on hold the day I moved out of his house.

“Because Abigail Hartly asked if I was going to be here. Maybe this will be my chance to change my high school experience. We said it was going to be better, right? It’s up to us to make that happen.”

“Sammi,” I sigh her name, exasperated. “Just because Abigail asked doesn’t mean she’s suddenly going to become our bff. She doesn’t care if you’re here or not. Take a good look around, everyone is laughing, drinking, dancing. We’re hiding in a corner. This isn’t changing anything and it sure isn’t fun.”

Sammi’s fists clench at her sides, she’s getting angry with me, when all I’m trying to do is make her open her eyes and see the truth. For God’s sake, Abigail isn’t even here! Sammi’s wearing the dress she was supposed to wear last year at our eighth-grade graduation, but her insecurities got the best of her, and she chose to wear something else. It’s a beautiful blue halter dress with a flower pattern. She says it’s a vintage Audrey Hepburn dress, Sammi told me she was going to save it for a special occasion, I guess she decided tonight would be that night. I don’t see what is so special about us hiding in a corner.

Sammi’s eyes snap to mine. “I’m not going to let you ruin this night for me. If you don’t want to be here, then leave. I’m

staying and I'm going to have a good time."

"Fine. Maybe I will." I stomp away, leaving her alone.

Finding an empty bedroom upstairs, I sit on the bed, and cover my face with my hands as the tears begin to fall. I hate fighting with her, she's my best friend. How can she still want to fit in with all of them after everything they've done to her? I don't get it.

"Brin?" My head snaps up in surprise at the sound of his voice. My heart hammers in my chest as he shuts the door. "What's wrong?" He sits beside me. I haven't been this close to him or even spoken to him in three years. My skin prickles with goosebumps from the air sizzling between us. The connection we had should have disappeared after this long. It hasn't, it's alive and has re-ignited, stronger than ever.

Lawson Beck was my everything, my soulmate, my first love, my first kiss. He was also my stepbrother until our parents ripped us apart and told us we couldn't so much as speak. Lawson tried several times, but I ignored him. I thought it would be better than taking the chance of my mom finding out and moving me thousands of miles away. If I ignored him and acted like he didn't exist, I could still see him. I didn't expect it to be so hard watching him get older and more good looking, making new friends, and have every girl in school want him. Maybe tonight is our night to get back what we lost because of our parents. I would do anything to have him back in my life.

"I got into a fight with Sammi." He wraps his arms around me. I scoot closer and soak in the familiar feel of his strong

embrace and the comforting smell of his citrus and spice cologne. "I've missed you so much, Lawson."

"You and Sammi will be fine tomorrow. You always are. I've missed you too. Do you still love me, Brin?"

Lifting my head, I stare into his piercing blue eyes. "Of course, I do!"

His palms cradle my cheeks, lips crash against mine, and his tongue coaxes my mouth open. Our tongues dance to their own rhythm. Butterflies swarm in my belly while my heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest. I don't stop the kiss; I don't stop Lawson from exploring with his hand under my shirt.

I don't know how long we made out for or how I found myself on my knees before him. I did something I have never done before when he unzipped his jeans. He told me to suck him, and I did until he was breathing hard and coming in my mouth.

He pushes my head back; my eyes meet his. "Who would have thought it was so easy to get you on your knees? I guess you really are a whore just like your mom."

"What?" Tears pool in my eyes.

Lawson zips his jeans and leaves me kneeling on the floor. I rush out of the bedroom and race out of the house. I will never forgive him for what he just did to me.

"B? You okay, girl?" I hear Kenzi's sweet southern voice approaching.

Wiping the tears trickling down my cheeks, I reply. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“Brin.” Lawson’s tone sounds frustrated, mixed with a begging urgency. “Please fucking talk to me!”

Kenzi takes one look at me and stomps toward Lawson. “I don’t know what you did to that girl, but she’s my friend now. Let me give you a piece of advice, Lawson Beck, don’t mess with a southern girl or her friends when she knows how to rope, shoot, ride, and rodeo.”

He shakes his head. “What does that even fucking mean?”

“I don’t need to explain a damn thing to you, but let me tell you this, I know how to take down a calf and have them tied up in less than three seconds.” She pokes him in his shoulder. “Don’t think I can’t take your big broody self down. You mess with her again and I’ll hog tie you to my bucking bronco and let him take care of your ass.”

Lawson’s eyes widen. “Are you threatening me?” I cup my hand over my mouth to contain my drunken giggling.

Kenzi pops her bottom lip out and crosses her arms over her chest. She’s tiny compared to Lawson. I’m five foot three and she’s shorter than I am. I wish I had her hourglass figure, I’m leaner with less curves. “I don’t threaten. I make promises that I never break.” Kenzi takes my hand and pulls me away from Lawson. “I called an Uber for us.” She opens the door and shoves me inside.

I begin laughing hysterically. “Did you see his face?” I try to breathe through my laughter.

Kenzi’s snort laughing now as well. “I hate to break it to you, home-skillet, but that boy isn’t going to let you move on for nothing.”

“Home-skillet.” I die with laughter. “I have to pee so bad!”

She taps the driver on the shoulder. “Hey, I’ll give you a nice tip if you get us back to campus quick.” Kenzi unleashes her signature wink on him.

“Not a problem, gorgeous.” He smiles at her in the rearview mirror. He’s a young guy with dark hair and black framed glasses. That’s about all I can see between the darkness and my blurred vision.

“Oh my God! We left Fisher! We have to go back!”

“Fisher was staying and catching a ride home with Lawson.”

“Of course he was, the traitor.” I throw myself back on the seat. I want to be mad at Fisher, but I can’t. We’re both his friends and I would never make Fisher choose. He might live with Lawson, but he was my friend first, damn it.

As I’m stepping out of the Uber, I pull my phone out of my back pocket, and search through my contacts. She answers almost immediately. “Brin?”

“Sammi, oh, Sammi, my best friend in the entire world!” I spin around in circles making my already blurred vision worse.

“Are you drunk?”

I hear her quietly laughing. “Don’t laugh at me. Oh, oh, Sammi! Say hello to my roommate,” I yell while putting my phone on speaker. “Her name is Kenzi and she’s from Tennessee.”

“Hello, Kenzi from Tennessee.”

“Hey, Sammi! I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“Hey, Brin.” Maddox’s voice comes over the speaker.

I squeal, “Maddox! Are you taking care of my girl? If not, I’ll cut you!”

Maddox’s deep laugh bellows through the phone. “Always.”

“I miss you guys.”

“We miss you too.” Sammi asks, “How’s Fisher?”

My eyes narrow as if I was looking at him right now. “Our friend Fisher is a fucking traitor.”

“Uh oh. What happened?”

“I went out celebrating because I got the job at the café, you know. He fucking brought Lawson, can you believe that? Then Lawson wants to act like some caveman and carry me out of the bar over his shoulder.”

I may not be able to see her, but I know Sammi well enough, she’s pacing with anticipation. “Oh, shit! Then what happened?” All of our friends want us together, but they don’t know the truth.

“I told him I will never forget or forgive him for calling me a whore.” Oh, no. Oh, shit. I have never told Sammi what Lawson did or why I hate him so much. Stupid drunken blabbering.

“He did what?” she screeches. “Maddox call your fucking friend right now! You tell him I am packing a bag and driving to Massachusetts because I’m going to kill him!”

I hear Maddox sigh heavily. “Pidge, we are not driving to Massachusetts for you to commit murder.”

“Get him on the phone, Walker.”

We enter our dorm room; I fall down on my bed and tears sting my eyes. I’m always an emotional mess when I get drunk. That’s why I don’t do it often. “Would you really come all the way here to kill him for me?”

“Of course, I would! Why the hell would he call you a whore? I don’t get it. He’s always been in love with you and for the last year he’s done nothing but try to get back in your good graces.”

My shoulders sag with the force of my released breath. It’s time to confess what I thought I would hold onto and take to the grave with me. I never wanted anyone to know what happened. How desperate, pathetic, and worthless he made me feel that night. I did what he wanted so easily, without question because I thought that was our chance to get us back. I honestly thought he still felt the same as I did. It took barely any convincing on his part to get me on my knees. I let him use me and he did so without remorse.

I have never understood how he could treat me like that, he was supposed to love me, he told me he missed me. I used to mean everything to him. It was all lies and from that night forward I realized how I remembered us was nothing but a façade. I never meant to him a fraction of what he meant to me. I would have never done something like that to him. Even after all these years betrayal sits heavily in my belly and heart. “Remember that party we went to freshman year? We had gotten into that argument because I didn’t want to be at the party, but you did because Abigail asked if you would be there.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“While Maddox and Axel were dumping drinks over your head, Lawson was using me to get a blow job. Once it was over, he zipped up his pants and said he didn’t know it would be so easy to get me on my knees and I was a whore just like my mom.”

Sammi gasps and Maddox says, “Fuck.”

“Walker...”

“I’m calling him now, Pidge.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” I hear the hurt in her voice. It’s not that I couldn’t trust her, it’s that my whole world imploded that night. I felt embarrassed, humiliated, and degraded. Even with what I went through, that was mild compared to Sammi’s experience.

I lay back on my bed and hold a pillow against my chest. “Because your problems were so much worse than mine. By the time last year came around Merick and Axel got together, you and Maddox were doing your thing, I just wanted to forget it, but he kept coming around.” Tears spill down my cheeks. “I thought once I got here, I could just let it go, let him go, but he’s still conveniently around. I want to let him go, but I don’t think I can.”

“Don’t cry, Brin!” She tells me that even though I hear her sobbing along with me. “Maybe you need to have a serious conversation with him and tell him you’re moving on and he needs to let you.”

I glance at Kenzi, she’s already asleep and lightly snoring on her bed. “Yeah, maybe. I just needed to hear your voice. I miss you and Merick, and home. I’ll talk to you soon. I love you.”

“I love you too, Brin.”

Hanging up the phone, I put it on the charger, and get ready for bed.



Chapter Six

LAWSON

“**L**awson, what the hell was Brin talking about? Did you call her a whore?” Seeing the disappointment etched on Fisher’s face is gut-wrenching. He’s my friend, but he was hers first. I won’t lie to him. If he hates me after I’ll understand. I already hate myself enough.

That night I was drunk and pissed off that she was at the party. She never went to parties. I saw it as my chance to get revenge on her for all of the pain and hurt I felt because of her. I watched her walk up those stairs, I followed behind, I waited in the hall for a few minutes, and then I entered the bedroom with her. It didn’t matter to me why she was there or what she might be going through, I couldn’t see past what she did to us. I wanted her to feel just as humiliated as I did. I wanted to make her feel as if she was nothing, like she made me feel by ignoring me and running away from me.

I run my hand over my face. I didn’t think it was possible to feel more like shit than I already did. Seeing Brin cry because of me was devastating. The sight of those tears filleted me from the inside out. It’s not the first time I’ve witnessed her

cry, but it was the first time I saw it because of my actions. She's always shown me her anger, her hate, but never vulnerability, the hurt, or pain. "There's more to it than that, Fisher. I'm leaving. You coming or not?"

He crosses his arms over his chest and stomps toward the lot like a petulant child. "I'm not staying here, but I really don't want to be near you right now. I can't fucking believe you!" I listen to Fisher's rant all the way to the car. He slams the passenger side door closed. "Brin is not a whore. I don't even understand why you would have ever called her that!"

Punching my fist on the steering wheel, I holler, "Don't you think I fucking know she's not a whore?"

He swivels in his seat, shooting fire-filled daggers into the side of my head. "Don't you fucking scream at me, Lawson Beck! You're the asshole here not me. I'm just standing up for my friend. You're my friend too, but I'm seriously so pissed at you right now. No wonder she won't forgive you. Why would you do that? She's not the whore here, you are," he scoffs. "Letting Brin watch some trashy ass girl sit on your lap all night. You got some nerve. Right now, I hate you too."

I suck in a deep breath and slowly release it. "You need to know the whole story. That girl didn't mean shit to me. I don't even know what her fucking name is. I just wanted to make Brin jealous."

He snorts. "You accomplished that, you fucking idiot. She climbed on a table and was dancing like a stripper, for God's sake. I want to hear this whole story of yours, goddammit."

My phone rings just as we're walking into our apartment. Maddox's name flashes on the screen. Shit! Did she call Sammi? Of fucking course, she did. I answer preparing to feel the wrath of her best friend. "Hey, Maddox."

"Lawson, you've got some explaining to do." I don't miss the irritation in his voice. "Pidge is so fucking pissed at you she told me to tell you that we're packing bags and driving to Massachusetts so she can kill you."

I run my fingers through my hair. "Brin called her. Tell your girl orange isn't a good look for her." I wouldn't blame Sammi or put it past her. She's loyal as fuck to her friends. She's one that if you call her at two in the morning, you don't even need to tell her what happened, she's already got her shoes on and is in her car coming to help you.

"Brin has loose lips when she's wasted, apparently. They just got done talking."

"Lawson, you using cuntnozzle, how could you?" Sammi screeches dramatically, causing my ears to ring. "Why do all of you act like a bunch of twatcakes? Every one of you act like it's so fucking hard to just be a nice goddamn person!"

"Don't put me in this, Pidge! I am nice," Maddox yells from a distance.

"Shut up! You were just as bad. No, I take that back, you were the worst."

"I'll show you who's being bad." I hear his muffled voice and the sounds of them kissing.

“I’m hanging up!”

“No, Sammi is right about all of you. I’d like to know what possesses you guys to act the way you do,” Fisher yells from the opposite end of the couch. He can hear the whole conversation since I put my phone on speaker when I answered. “I mean, is it so hard for all of you to have a simple conversation? Instead, you all lash out and hurt people instead of just admitting how you feel.” Fisher shakes his head. “You guys are so stupid!”

“Hi, Fisher!” Sammi exclaims in her sweet voice. I guess her pissiness is solely for me.

Leaning back on the couch, I prop my elbow up, and rest my head on my fist. “I didn’t use her...”

“Liar!” Sammi’s shrill voice cuts me off. “According to Brin that’s exactly what you did. After you got your rocks off in her mouth you told her you didn’t know it would be so easy to get her on her knees. Then you told her she’s a whore just like her mom. Is that true or not?”

Fisher slaps his forehead. “Oh, my fucking God it just keeps getting worse.”

I dart my narrowed eyes to his. “Shut up, Fisher!” I begin explaining my side to the three of them. “Yes, it’s true, but Jesus Christ, let me explain. Do you remember we were inseparable until our parents got divorced? They told us we couldn’t have anything to do with each other or even speak to each other anymore?”

“Of course, I do. Brin came to my house hysterical.”

“I wasn’t going to let them rip us apart like that, but she did. I tried to talk to her so many times, Sammi, but she ran away from me. She wouldn’t even look at me. Brin let them shatter what we had. I hated her for doing that to us. My whole world crumbled all around me when I didn’t have her in my life anymore. She shut me out of her life like I never meant a goddamn thing to her. Brin acted like I was invisible, I couldn’t handle it. Because here I was feening for just a moment with her like a fucking addict and she dropped me cold turkey. She fucking destroyed me, and I hated her for it.”

Sammi’s voice calms. “Lawson, do you have any idea why she did that?”

The back of my throat prickles with emotion. “Yes, because that’s what her mom wanted. Brin was always the good girl. Always following directions, always listening, never getting into trouble. I became so pissed at her that all I could see was I needed to hurt her like she hurt me. That’s why I did it. I didn’t use her. I was young and stupid and wanted her to feel the same anguish I had felt for years because of her.” That familiar ache in my chest tightens. I rub against my chest to try and ease the discomfort.

“Oh, Lawson, you have it so wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You need to find that out from her. All I’m going to say is let her go. She’s my best friend, but you’ve become a friend as

well. Let her find happiness if it's not with you. Maybe you should find someone who will make you happy too."

My head rears back as if she'd slapped me through the phone. "I'm not letting her go. What the fuck kinda bullshit is this, Sammi? Let her go! No, no fucking way. She's it for me. Brinley Ryan is my motherfucking end game."

I hear the flick of Maddox's lighter. He releases a deep breath. He just lit up a blunt and damn I wish I could be smoking with him right now. I used to when we were in high school, but I gave it up when we moved here. College football doesn't play around with drug use. I could be piss tested at any moment without warning. If I failed, it would be the end of my dream. I would be kicked off the team with no chance of being drafted. I can picture the smoke rolling out from between his lips and his mind growing foggy. I can practically smell the skunk stench through the phone.

"If you feel that way, bro, make it fucking happen. Stop letting her win this game you two have been playing for too fucking long. Take control from her and make Brin realize she needs you just as much as you need her."

My lips quirk. "Is that how you got Sammi?"

"Damn right it is and my huge c..."

"Okay!" Sammi interrupts. "Do not take advice from someone that's high." She lightly laughs.

"I don't know. Maddox's advice was a fuck ton better than yours."

“You just need to have a conversation with Brin. Bye, Lawson. And Fisher don’t think you’re off the hook either, but it’s late and I’m going to bed.”

Fisher crosses his arms and slouches on the couch. “Miss you guys.”

“We miss you too, Fisher. Or should I start calling you, The Traitor?”

He pokes his bottom lip out like she just hurt his feelings. “She’s that mad at me?” Now who’s over there sulking on the couch? Good, he needs to feel the wrath of Brin too. He doesn’t really because he didn’t do anything wrong, but I’ve been sailing this ship alone for too long.

“Right now, yes.”

“Bye.” I end the call.

“Lawson.”

I hold my hand up, before he says anything else. “I’m not dealing with any more shit tonight. I’m going to bed.” I stomp to my room and slam the door closed before falling onto my bed.

I hear the faint sound of Brin crying. Quietly opening her bedroom door, I peek inside. “Brin, you, okay?”

Her head darts in my direction. “Law, I’m scared.”

Stepping into her room, I close the door behind me. I walk to her bed and sit in front of her. “Why are you scared?”

“Because they’re always fighting.” She’s referring to our parents, the last few months have been miserable in this house because of their constant arguing. I remember having that same scared feeling before my mom and dad split up. She should too from her own parents’ messy break-up. Her mom and dad were never married though. “What if they get divorced and we’re separated?”

“Hey.” I tenderly clutch her cheeks in my palms, thumbs wiping away her tears. Her emerald, green eyes shine. She’s so beautiful. “No matter what happens with them they can’t separate us. Remember our pact?”

She nods. “We never leave each other. We’ll always be best friends and never break promises.”

I smile proudly. “That’s right. I’m going to be the quarterback, you’re going to be head cheerleader, and then we graduate. We go to college together, always together.”

Brin sighs as if my words give her the reassurance she needs that everything is going to be fine. I will always protect, comfort, and put her at ease to reassure her of what may be a false reality. I know things aren’t fine and most likely won’t be, but I won’t let Brin worry about that. I will shield her from it until I can’t any longer. “Always together.” She repeats my words. I sit here silent and motionless gazing at her, she’s peering at me just as quiet and frozen. My hands cradle her face, something unexplainable happens inside of me.

My mouth moves closer to hers like I’m being pulled, I’m unable to cut this invisible cord that is tightening around us.

Her eyes grow large as do mine. She gasps just as my mouth crashes against hers. Our lips mold together like we're one piece now. This is our first kiss, my first kiss with anyone and hers as well.

Pressing my forehead against Brin's our lips part. "I love you, Brin."

Her hand caresses my cheek. "I love you too, Law."

My thumb runs along my mouth, remembering that night. It was our first kiss. My heart exploded like fireworks when my lips touched hers. I've never felt anything comparable to the softness of Brin's lips, no matter how many girls I've been with.

Our parents split up a few days later and my world fell apart. Brin broke our pact and broke the promises we made.



Monday morning I'm lying on a weight bench in the gym with Kamdon Gentry spotting me as I lift. Five Finger Death Punch blares through the speakers. "What's up with you and that girl from the bar Friday night?"

"Nothing's up." I don't want to talk about Brin with him.

"She yours?"

I drop the bar onto the bar catcher and quickly sit up. "No."

Turning, I meet his sheepish expression while he rubs the back of his neck. "So, it'd be cool with you if I asked her

out?”

I wipe the sweat off my face with my towel and throw it onto the bench beside me. “She’s off fucking limits.” Standing up, I head for the showers and add, “Make sure everyone on this team knows that.”

He hollers, “But you said...”

“She’s off fucking limits,” I roar as I turn the water on.

I’ll make sure every motherfucker on this campus knows not to fuck with Brin if I have to. I’m not going to lose her, and I don’t care what I have to do to make that happen. I’m sure as hell not going to watch her prance around with some other guy especially one from my own team. Maddox’s advice from the other night replays in my head. *If you feel that way, bro, make it fucking happen. Stop letting her win this game you two have been playing for too fucking long. Take control from her and make Brin realize she needs you just as much as you need her.*

After I’m finished with my shower, I grab my duffel bag and head out for lunch. Remembering Brin started her new job today, Washmore Café sounds like a great place to eat.

It’s only a five-minute walk from practice to the café. As I approach the entrance my steps halt. I see her inside standing close, too close for my comfort, to some guy. She’s smiling, he’s smiling, they’re laughing, she looks up at him, he looks down at her and I don’t fucking like the way they’re looking at each other. I push the door open as hard as I intended to, her eyes lock with mine. I will go to fucking war for this girl, I

don't give a fuck who I have to destroy. I never shared her before, I'm not about to now.



Chapter Seven

BRINLEY

Dean stands next to me, watching as I attempt to make a white chocolate mocha. I did the correct amount of espresso; I drizzled the chocolate sauce on top and the steamed milk is ready. I hold my hand steady as he directs me on how to make the cute little heart. It doesn't turn out as a heart at all. More like a man's.... well.... you get the picture. My face flames with embarrassment. Dean tries to hide his laughter but is totally unsuccessful. "It takes some practice."

I scoff. "Don't try to make me feel better about turning this cup of coffee X-rated." Laughter consumes the both of us. I peer up at Dean, he stares down at me. I feel something brewing between us that shouldn't be, he's my boss. But this doesn't seem like how a boss and employee would be looking at each other. I'm just about to break our eye contact to dispose of the coffee when the door flies open and the bells chime announcing we have a customer.

"Welcome to Washmore..." My words trail off. Lawson stands just inside with deadly fire in his blue depths. I swallow, the smile falls from my face. He's wearing a beater

and sweats; his brown hair is wet and messed up like he showered before coming here. The muscles in his arms flex and veins in his forearms protrude as he clenches his fists. God, those muscles. In the sex appeal department Lawson Beck is deadly. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry, she’s new.” Dean tries to correct my awkward behavior. “Welcome to Washmore Café, how can I help you?” He gives Lawson the proper welcoming I was taught when I first clocked in today.

He focuses on the menu above us, but I see his chiseled jaw working. He used to always grind his teeth when he was agitated or trying to keep his mouth shut. Usually if he spoke what he was thinking it led to him getting in trouble. “I would like the club sandwich with a side of fries. I’ll just have water to drink.” His fierce blue eyes laser mine. You could cut the tension between us with a knife.

“I’ll start your order right away. Brinley, ring him up please.” Dean disappears into the back area where our kitchen is. I forgot he was standing beside me.

The air circulating around us is stifling. How does Lawson have the ability to make everyone, and everything, vanish when he walks into a room? I repeat, “What are you doing here?”

“Who the fuck is that?” Lawson growls under his breath.

“My new boss.” I plead with him. “Don’t mess this up for me.”

His brow cocks. “Don’t mess what up exactly?”

“My job. Jesus!”

His hands slap onto the counter. He leans in close, mere inches from my face. “What I saw through that fucking window wasn’t a boss looking at an employee and vice versa.”

I can’t rebut what he’s saying because he’s right. Grabbing a bottle of water out of the cooler, I slam it onto the cool stainless steel, he snatches it out of my hand before I let go. After paying, Lawson sits at an empty table and stares at the brick wall.

Dean brings the plate to the front. “I’ll take it to him. Can I have a few minutes?”

He holds the plate out for me. “Take all the time you need.” The way his brows pinch and eyes search mine, I feel like his words are a double meaning. It feels like he’s referring to more than just this moment.

Sucking in a deep breath, I walk toward Lawson and place the plate in front of him. I pull out the chair on the opposite side of the table as him and sit. “You have to stop this.”

His piercing stare meets mine. My belly does somersaults from the way he’s looking at me. “Stop what?”

I don’t even know how to explain the emotions I see behind his blue depths. It’s like he’s dropping all of his walls and physically choking me. The pain and hurt is suffocating. How can we still be invisibly connected? We were always in tune with each other’s every thought and feeling when we were

kids, but that was lost after he used me or so I thought. I have to stay strong. I want a new life that he doesn't exist in, and I want to move on. I'm not going to let him affect me or distract me from what I deserve.

I tilt my head a fraction. He knows exactly what I'm talking about. I'm not going to let him play innocent or stupid. "Coming to my job, showing up wherever I am. Moving away to college was supposed to be me starting over. We both know you followed me here. Let it go, Lawson. Let me fucking go!" I'm trying to keep my voice calm and keep myself collected, but it's hard. I've avoided him for so long. After the blow-up Friday night and now sitting here with him, it's bringing so many of my own feelings and emotions bubbling to the surface. Gone West's song "I'm Never Getting Over You" quietly plays throughout the café. He sits unmoving, fists knuckle white on the table, eyes a blazing inferno of anger. Lawson slowly chews a bite of food. The words of the song constrict me like a weight too heavy for me to lift off my chest. Tears burn in my eyes. "I can't do this."

He blinks a few times like he's holding back his own tears. "That's really what you want? You want us to just move the fuck on with other people? We just forget everything and act like we never meant anything to each other?"

"Yes, that's what I want." I try to hold a steady tone, but inside I'm breaking. My voice is nothing more than a whisper, I'm struggling for air to breathe. I know my next words are going to hit him harder than any take down in football could. "I wish I would have never met you."

Lawson runs his tongue along his teeth and pushes his plate away with his barely touched food. He stands up and steps closer to me, he bends so we're eye level with one another. "Fuck you, Brin." He storms out of the café.

My hand flies to my mouth. Running to the bathroom, I throw the door open. I can't control the sobs racking through me. Looking at myself in the mirror, I'm pulled into the past.

"Wouldn't you rather be outside throwing your football around with one of your friends?"

"Nope. I would rather be right here." Lawson lies on my bed throwing his football into the air and catching it. I'm sitting on my floor trying to put this thousand-piece puzzle together that my nanna and pawpaw gave me. It's supposed to be a picture of under the ocean with fish when I'm done.

"Seriously, I can have Sammi come over and help me. You can go play with the boys you're friends with like Axel and Maddox."

Lawson rolls to his side and props his elbow up resting his cheek on his fist. "Do you want me to go away, Brin? You don't want me around?"

"Law, no!" My heart thuds in my chest, an awful feeling turns my stomach. I always want to be around him, and I don't ever want him to think that I don't. I never want to be without Lawson. "I just thought this might be boring to you and you would have more fun with them."

His bright blue eyes soften. "It's never boring with you, Brin, I don't care what we do as long as we're together."

I beam with happiness. "Then get down here and help me with this puzzle."

Lawson smiles showing his dimples. "Thought you would never ask." He hops off the bed and sits next to me bumping my shoulder with his, making me giggle.

I take a couple of deep breaths and slap my face with cool water before exiting the bathroom. I meet Dean back at the counter. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry about that."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I smile halfheartedly. "No, it's a long story." Sympathy and pity shine clear as day in his whiskey eyes. "Want to try showing me the design again?"

I wish I could hide away so Dean wouldn't see me like this. Especially when it's my first day. I have tried so hard for so long to keep my feelings and emotions bottled up and hidden. After that night between me and Lawson I only ever showed my hatred and anger for him. But now it seems no matter how hard I try to shove all other feelings and emotions deep down, Lawson keeps forcing them to the surface. I wish I could be swallowed whole and never have to feel what I'm feeling right now. Regardless of my red-rimmed bloodshot eyes and breaking heart, I have to stay strong. This is what I wanted,

this is what I needed, for Lawson to vanish from my life. Maybe he has for good this time.

“Sure.”



Kenzi sits cross-legged on her bed clutching a pillow as she and Fisher listen to me ramble on about my first day of work. “Lawson showed up at the café?” Kenzi doesn’t sound shocked or surprised.

I lay with my head in Fisher’s lap while he drags his fingers through my hair. He knows that relaxes me. I need all the relaxation I can get after my stressful day. What am I talking about? I’m eighteen and my life shouldn’t be this full of stress. “Yep. I sat down with him and told him to stop showing up everywhere I’m at. I told him to let me go.”

“Is that what you really want though?”

I glance up at Fisher with knitted brows. “Yes, that’s really what I want. You think I don’t?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I just want you to be sure and not say something you might regret. Can you really see yourself with someone else? How are you going to feel when Lawson falls in love with someone, and you see them together?”

I roll my eyes and snort. “I watched Lawson with plenty of girls all through middle and high school, I was fine.”

He huffs dramatically. “You watched him run through those girls like he was playing connect the dots. You knew those

girls didn't mean shit to him. I'm talking about Lawson finding someone that makes him happy, that gives him everything that he wanted from you, and makes him fall in love with her. Can you handle that, Brin?"

"I don't know, okay, but if that was to happen, I would have to deal with it. I can't be with him, Fisher."

It would completely destroy me, but time heals all wounds, right? No, that's a lie because if it did, I wouldn't still feel like I had a huge gaping hole in my chest caused by Lawson. My only other option would be to move off the grid, so no one could ever find me. I would never have to see his devastatingly gorgeous face again. That sounds like a pretty damn good plan right now.

"Well, I for one am happy that you told him off." Kenzi cuts the tension in the room. She wiggles her eyebrows. "What about you and that hot boss of yours? Y'all could dirty up that café real good."

Fisher and I burst out laughing. "Shut up!" I grab a throw pillow from my bed and toss it at her. "He's my boss! That's a line I won't cross."

I'm not going to dwell on the what-ifs because they haven't happened yet. I can only try to start healing my broken heart and focus on myself. I can't let Fisher or anyone else get in my head about Lawson no matter how hard they try.



Chapter Eight

LAWSON

The front door slams shut. Fisher storms into the kitchen, pacing our ceramic tile floor, he props his hands on his hips. “You’re just going to let this happen?”

My eyes lift from the steak I’m cooking on the stove. “Let what happen? What the fuck are you talking about and what has you so riled up?”

“What do you think I’m so riled up about? You letting Brin go! We can’t let that happen, what are we going to do about it?”

I slap the medium rare meat onto a plate. “We aren’t going to do a damn thing about it.” The way her eyes welled with tears; I saw how conflicted she is. That water-filled gaze told me her love for me is still in there, imbedded deep in her heart. Her words, though, those had me falling apart because I knew she truly wanted to mean them. My heart and soul crumbled like a building being demolished. She still loves me, but she hates me more.

“You have to do something, Lawson, or you are going to lose her forever.” He pouts on the barstool beside me as I cut

into my food and take the first bite.

The burst of flavor makes me practically moan with how good it fucking tastes. I'm starving after barely eating any lunch then heading back to the field for practice. "Brin made it very clear that she wants me to stay away from her. I've tried, God knows I have fucking tried with her. I can't do it anymore."

"I didn't take you for a quitter."

I groan. "What do you expect me to fucking do here, Fisher? There's nothing else I can do if Brin thinks I'm not shit to her."

Why is it always coming down to me not doing enough, not trying hard enough? I fucked up, I realize this, I have admitted it and acknowledged it, I have apologized. If that's not good enough, then it's a lost fucking cause.

He smacks his hand on the table. "Axel and Merick worked their shit out. Maddox and Sammi overcame all of their shit. I don't get why you two can't."

Axel and Merick don't have a history, nor do they have a lifetime of memories together. Sammi and Maddox... well she's a hell of a lot more forgiving and a lot less stubborn than Brin. "I don't know, Fisher, maybe we were never meant to be like the others."

He sucks in a sharp breath of air. "Blasphemy! You don't mean that."

“Yeah, I do.” I take my plate to the sink and begin rinsing it to put in the dishwasher.

I always believed Brin and I were written in the stars, but even those fade away over time.



We're gearing up for the first football game of the season. Practices are more strenuous as we grow closer. We have Sundays off for relaxing, but the rest of the week is go time. I'm busting ass out on that field in hopes of Coach Patterson and Assistant Coach Anderson seeing how much I want this. I'm expecting to be benched since I'm the backup quarterback. I won't get game time unless something happens to Trevor. He's set to be a first-round pick in the draft though, so I don't expect my time to come until next season.

Classes have begun which makes my busy schedule even busier. Between classes, football, and studying they've helped keep my mind off Brin. I'm staying away from her like she's wanted. With my tedious routine I wouldn't be able to see her right now anyway even if I wanted to.

I'm trying to avoid Fisher the best I can. I don't want his updates on her or the *what am I going to do* questions. I don't want him coming up with elaborate schemes or grand gestures, as he calls them, for me. Fisher may think I don't know who Brin is, but I do. I saw it in her eyes that day at the café, she loves me, I know she does, but her hate for me runs deeper. If I push her too hard, she's going to run, and I can't let that

happen. I want him to let it go like I'm trying to do. If it was meant to be like I know it was she'll find her way back to me. I'm done pushing myself into her life and going through the fucking heartache of her not wanting me there.

Call it fate if you will, but something has always brought Brin and I together. Out of any woman my dad could have started dating and married it was Brin's mom that brought her into my life in the first place. It was Abigail asking Sammi if she would be at a party, putting Brin in that room the night I fucked up. Merick brought us all together as a group, even though Brin wanted nothing to do with me. She was accepted into Washmore University, and I accepted a full ride scholarship from them. If we are destined to be then something will bring her back to me again. I just have to be patient and wait for the sign. When it comes, I will be there with open arms. I just hope I'm doing the right thing by staying away. This could backfire and as Fisher said I could lose her forever.

Fisher yells, "Lawson, come talk to Axel." Why wouldn't Axel just call me? In the living room, Fisher's holding his phone out in front of him. "I was talking to Merick, and they need to tell us something."

"Hey, Ax, what's up?"

"Don't bother saying hello to me, asshole." I hear the anger in Merick's tone.

I grunt. "Hey, Merick." She's pissed at me too. That means all the girls have been talking and she know what I did too.

“Clear your calendars for when you come home for our Friendsgiving?”

“Why?”

What Axel says next has me shaking my head with a full-on smile. “Maddox, you, and Fisher gotta be standing up there with me when I marry Rebel.”

“No shit, man? Congratulations, you guys! I’ll be there!”

Fisher throws his phone onto the couch then claps excitedly. “Oh my God! I’m so happy for you guys! You know I’m not missing that!”

Merick adds, “Just because I’m allowing Axel to have you, Lawson, in the wedding doesn’t mean I won’t kick you in the junk for what you did to Brin. I did it to Wyatt and I’ll do it to you too. I’m not scared to kick your ass for hurting her like you did.”

I throw my hands in the air frustrated as fuck. “Has everyone forgotten how many times I have fucking apologized? I’m sorry! I’m fucking sorry, okay? Maddox made a sex tape and didn’t even get this much shit.”

“Don’t you even...” Merick’s words muffle, probably from Axel cupping his hand over her mouth.

“I’ll be in touch with more details and shit later.”

“Sounds good, bro, fuck I’m happy for you!” Regardless if Merick’s pissed off at me or not, I’m still excited for them to start this new life together. They may be young, but they’ve been through hell and back.

“Thanks, Lawson.”

“Wait. Wait. Wait.” Fisher blabbers the words together. “We need your opinion on something, Axel.”

“Give me a minute,” he whispers and it sounds like they kiss. A few seconds later he asks, “What’s up?” I hear the curiosity through the phone. *Fuck me!* I know where this is going, fucking Fisher. This is the exact reason I have been avoiding his sneaky ass.

“No, we really don’t.”

Axel chuckles. “Ah, shit. It’s about Brin, isn’t it?”

Fisher starts running his mouth like the nosy little shit he is. “Lawson here thinks it’s a good idea for him to just let Brin go. I personally think that’s a terrible idea. Don’t you, Axel? I told him he needs to figure out some grand gesture to get her not to hate him, but he’s not listening. If he just lets her go, he’s practically pushing her into the arms of that hot boss of hers.”

“Well, I think...”

I cut Axel off and shoot daggers at Fisher. “What the fuck do you mean, hot boss of hers? Is something going on between the two of them?” An inferno of rage ignites, burning through my veins. If he fucking touches her, I swear to fucking God and all that’s holy I will break his fucking fingers. He won’t be making little cutesy fucking coffee with his hands in casts.

“Oh, Axel, you should see him right now. I can’t tell if his head or that vein in his neck is going to burst first. His face is

the color of Maddox's car, and his eyes are the size of saucers. I'm literally scared right now. Calm down, Lawson, before you blow a gasket." Fisher's staring at me like I've grown two heads.

Axel howls with laughter. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, Fisher. Lawson isn't letting her go, he's biding his fucking time. I did the same with Rebel. Maddox did what he knew he needed to for Sammi. Lawson knows Brin, he'll figure it out."

We say our goodbyes to Axel. Scowling at Fisher, I ask him again, "Is she fucking around with her boss?"

He replies timidly, "No, not yet. It's only a matter of time though. Anyone who goes into that café and sees the way they look all starry-eyed at each other sees what is prospering between them." Prospering my ass! No one will be prospering shit with Brin. My fist will prosper his fucking face.

It wasn't just me seeing it. I knew in my fucking gut it was more than something innocent between a boss and his employee. My footfalls pound against our hardwood floors as I storm back to my room and slam the door closed.

Snatching my earbuds off the desk, I hit the playlist I have titled AC/DC in my phone. Sitting down on my weight bench, I pick up a dumbbell to do some reps to try and calm myself down. I'm beginning to second-guess everything.

What if Fisher's right and I'm losing her forever? What if this time there is nothing to bring her back to me? Why can't she be like any other girl and not matter? Why is letting her go

so fucking hard? Why can't I just accept this is what she wants?

Because Brinley Ryan has and will always be mine.



Chapter Nine

BRINLEY

Kenzi and I are walking toward our dormitory after class when we suddenly stop. Fire trucks are lined up along the curb. “What’s going on?” Girls are scattered around the outside talking.

“I ain’t gotta clue.” Everything was fine when we left this morning. We take a few more steps, then see that water is gushing from inside; it’s cascading down the steps like a waterfall.

I ask someone nearby, “What happened?”

“The water pipes busted. They don’t know how bad it is and no one is allowed inside. All floors have been damaged, but the first two floors are the worst, they’re ruined.”

Kenzi’s mouth drops open matching my own. “Where are we supposed to stay? What about our stuff?”

“The university is making accommodations for all of us to stay in shelters until further notice.”

Dread sinks into the pit of my stomach. How many have lost all of their stuff? How many of them or their parents have

money to buy brand new wardrobes and personal items? Not to mention memorabilia that can't be replaced is gone. Did Kenzi and I lose our stuff? If we did, we lost all of our pictures and reminders of home. "Kenzi, do you want to stay in a shelter?"

She shakes her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "What if we lost all of our stuff?" Her voice trembles. "That's all I had of home." She says exactly what I was thinking.

Shit! I wrap my arms around her. "I'm sorry, Kenzi. All we can do is hope. I don't want to stay in a shelter either." This is bad, so fucking bad. "I have some money left. We can get an Airbnb, but I don't know how long we could stay. I don't know how long it'll be before they get this fixed."

Fisher sidles up next to us. "What's going on?"

"The water pipes busted. The university is making accommodations for all of us to go to shelters." Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I start searching for a place.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting an Airbnb with Kenzi."

He snatches my phone out of my hand, holding it high above his head. Even jumping, I wouldn't be able to reach that far to get it back. "No, you're not and neither of you are staying in a shelter either."

Narrowing my gaze, I rest my hands on my hips. "What do you mean no I'm not? We have to sleep somewhere, Fisher."

His finger dances between us. “You two are staying at the apartment. You can share the spare room.”

“Really?” Kenzi asks excitedly at the same time I reply, “The hell we are.”

Fisher sighs exasperatedly. “Don’t be ridiculous, Brin. This is no time for your stubbornness. There’s no reason to waste more money on an Airbnb than you already have. I let it slide when we first moved here. But desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Crossing my arms over my chest defiantly, I hiss, “I am not staying under the same roof as him.” We all know who that him is. The last time I saw Lawson I told him to stop showing up wherever I was and that I wished I never met him. How can I walk into his apartment and expect him to give me a room to sleep in now?

He rolls his eyes. “That him is barely there. When he is he’s in his room studying and this weekend is the first game of the season, so he’ll be there even less.”

“Come on, B. I agree with Fisher. There’s no reason for us to spend money if we don’t have to. I only have a card that my parents load with a monthly allowance for me. I would rather save it for other stuff I might need.”

These two are going to be the death of me. I can’t say no when they gang up on me. They’re both pouting at me with puppy dog eyes and fluttering their lashes innocently.

My shoulders slump as I release a breath, then I finally concede. “Fine. Do you need to tell him?”

“Nope.” Fisher looks absolutely giddy with his dazzling smile.

Fisher holds my phone out in front of him. “I hate you.” Yanking it out of his grasp, I push it into the back pocket of my shorts.

“And I love you, bestie.” He throws one arm over my shoulders and the other over Kenzi’s. “It’s going to be great, you’ll see.” *Great my ass.*

Thankfully, the apartment is a short walk from campus and on the bottom floor. Giving my legs a break from climbing up and down all those stairs is enough to make me excited to stay here.

We have no clothes, no nothing. I guess I’ll be calling Dean and letting him know what happened and that I might need a couple of days off. Since I’m saving money not getting an Airbnb I can spend some on a few new outfits. Hopefully, he’ll understand, and it won’t reflect badly on me. In the last month, I haven’t called in or been late once.

Fisher opens the door, the three of us stagger inside. The first thing I see is Lawson sitting on the couch. So much for never seeing him, Fisher’s a fucking liar. I should have known he would fabricate the truth. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply. I knew this was a bad idea but damn it he looks so stinking good. This was a terrible idea! This screams trouble and I’m not sure how strong my willpower is to stay away from said

trouble when we're going to be in such close proximity and he looks like that. *Heaven help me.*

I cautiously open my eyes. Lawson's shirtless which means I get the pleasurable view of every carved muscle, the outline of every ab, the perfectly sculpted V that disappears under his low fitting basketball shorts. I absorb the color of his tanned skin, and the word sinner in big bold black letters down his side. Stars tattooed on his chest and silver shining on his nipples. When did he get tattoos and when the hell did he let someone shove needles through his nipples? Lawson worked out in high school and was fit, but the muscles he's gained since being here... *God, they are sexy. He is drop dead gorgeous.* I can practically feel the drool running down my chin.

"What's going on?" He sits up resting his elbows on his knees, distracting me from ogling him further.

Fisher gives him the biggest shit-eating grin I have ever seen in my life. "Brin and Kenzi are moving in."

His stare widens while he blinks rapidly like he's trying to process Fisher's words. "Excuse me? They're what?"

"We're not moving in exactly." Kenzi tries to soften the shock.

"The dorm's water pipes busted, and they need a place to stay until it's fixed," Fisher explains.

"No." Lawson jumps from the couch. "They're not staying here."

My nose crinkles. “What?” I didn’t want to come here in the first place. I know he has every right and reason to say no, but to actually hear him say it... It hurts.

Fisher grumbles, “Lawson, do you really,” he puts emphasis on *really*. “Want Brin to go stay at some shelter where God knows what could happen to her?”

Lawson shakes his head. “Don’t do that, Fisher.” He’s referring to Fisher’s way of guilt-tripping. It’s what Fisher does best to get people roped into doing exactly what he wants. “First off,” he points to Kenzi, “that one threatened to kill me. And second,” his head tips toward me, “we all know how she feels about me.”

Kenzi puts her hand up. “Alright, Lawson, I am sorry for threatening to hog tie you to my bucking bronco. I just don’t want you hurting my friend. Can’t you appreciate my loyalty here?”

Lawson groans loudly. “I’m so fucking tired of everyone saying shit about me hurting Brin. How the fuck do you all think I feel every goddamn time she won’t fucking acknowledge me? When my whole childhood revolved around her and now, she says she wants to forget and act like it never meant a fucking thing to her.” He jabs his finger toward me, face scattered with emotion. “You’re the one that said you wished you never met me. I have tried and tried and tried and you tell me to let you fucking go. That’s what I’ve been doing for the last fucking month and now here you are needing something from me. How do you think it makes me fucking

feel? I made one mistake.” He holds that same finger up. “One. And I have paid the price for it. Look at everything you have done to me, you think that shit doesn’t hurt? I have feelings too goddammit.” By the end of his rant his chest is heaving with rapid breaths.

My mouth flops open and closed. “I don’t need anything from you! I told Fisher I would go to an Airbnb, and he insisted that I come here. Do you think I want to be under the same fucking roof as you? I don’t want to be here anymore than you want me here. But I don’t have a choice. If you really don’t want me here, I will go to a shelter, but at least let Kenzi stay. Please.”

Kenzi’s eyes dart between the two of us. “I’m not staying here without you, B.”

“Lawson,” Fisher grits through clenched teeth.

His glaring eyes burn with a fiery rage. “Use the spare bedroom. Stay out of my way and I’ll stay out of yours. Don’t eat my fucking food.” He turns to walk away. “I’m sleeping with one eye open and locking my door.”

I shoot Fisher a look that screams I wish I could kill you with a thousand burning suns for bringing me here. “Fisher! I can’t believe I let you talk me into this! Show me where the damn spare room is.”

“Lord almighty this is going to be a disaster. These two have their undies twisted so far up their asses I don’t know how they’re still walking straight,” Kenzi mumbles behind us.

Fisher points to a door. “That’s the bathroom.” He opens a door across the hall. “Here’s the spare room.”

Stepping inside, it’s spacious with a queen-sized bed and dresser, with the walls painted bright white. “I need to call Dean.”

Kenzi and Fisher leave the room to give me some privacy. Dean answers on the third ring. “Brinley?”

My heart beats frantically with nervousness. “I’m so sorry, but I’m going to have to take a few days off. The water pipes busted at the dorm, and I can’t get inside to get clothes or anything.”

“I heard about that. It’s no problem at all. I’m actually going to close the café for a couple of days because I’m going to help with the cleanup. I can give you a call with any updates I get.”

I release the breath I was holding and sag with relief. “That would be amazing! Thank you!”

“Did you get a bed at one of the shelters? They’re filling up fast and the university might have to find other accommodations since they can only hold so many people.”

“My roommate and I are staying with a friend.”

“That’s great to hear. Bye, Brinley.”

“Bye, Dean.”

I’m suddenly feeling grateful that Lawson’s letting us stay. What if he wouldn’t have? I could have possibly used the rest

of my money depending on the severity of the damage. I'm not sure how much Kenzi has for her monthly allowance, but they were right, it would have been a waste of money. Maybe I should tell Lawson thank you.

I knock on one closed door but there's no answer. I go to the next and hear him call out, "Yeah?"

Swallowing my pride, I hesitantly open the door. I was not prepared for the sight I stumble into. Lawson's sitting on a weight bench curling a dumbbell, he's glistening with sweat. "The Drug in Me Is You" by Falling In Reverse plays through the speakers of his stereo. Sweat should gross me out, but the scene I'm mesmerized by is anything but disgusting. Like I said, Lawson always took great care of himself, but I swear he's doubled in size since we left Cape Cove. Or maybe I just didn't pay close enough attention to what was in front of me.

His piercing blue eyes lock with my lustful gaze. He drops the weight onto his carpeted floor. "What?" His one-word answer lets me know he's still pissed.

I chew on my bottom lip nervously. "I wanted to say thank you for letting us stay here and for not making us go to a shelter. I know I'm invading your space after I told you to let me go and that I wished I never met you. I'll stay out of your way. I promise. I don't want to make this harder on either of us."

He runs his hand through his soaked hair. "Fuck, Brin, you know I would never turn you away." A wrinkle forms between his brows. My heart constricts with his words. "I have tried to

do what you asked. I've stayed away, but here you are. That tells me all I need to know."

I swallow hard, my heart hammers in my chest. "What does it tell you?"

"That I can't let you go." His stare penetrates my soul, my heart rate spikes. "I was waiting for the sign and now I got it." I have no idea what he's talking about. What sign? Lawson stands up and closes the distance between us. My spine hits the wall. "That hate you have for me is going to simmer down until it's no longer there." His arms cage me in, his finger brushes loose strands of hair off my forehead. "I'm going to be your everything again." His hot breath wisps across the shell of my ear. "Souls don't detach no matter how badly you want them to." He steps away, opening the door as he does. I'm shell-shocked by his admission.

I can't pull myself away from the wall. I'm trying to gain my bearings. "You didn't have any of your shit with you, so here." My lashes flutter, our gazes collide once again. His outstretched arm is pointed in my direction, in his fist he holds a shirt and pair of boxers. "I know how much you hate sleeping in the clothes you wore all day."

He's right, it's one of my quirks. The best part of my day has always been at night after showering when I get to put on something comfortable. To me removing the clothes I've worn all day is like washing away the day. Wearing clothes I wore all day to bed is just as bad as walking around with wet socks on. *Worst feeling ever!*

Horrible...terrible...worst idea ever staying here, not because I hate him. It's because Lawson Beck is lethal and he's going to do whatever it takes to make me fall. I need to avoid him at every moment because the hate is what's kept my heart together all this time. If I lose that hate, then I have nothing protecting me from him completely shattering me this time. If he's going to play this game, I have no doubt he will win. I need to protect myself at all costs.

Taking the clothes from him, I scurry out of his room and back to the one I'm staying in. Picking up my phone, I call my nanna.

"Brinley, I wasn't expecting your call until Sunday! How are you, Honey?" I don't know what I would ever do without her and my pawpaw. Before moving here, we made a rule that I am to call every Sunday, so they know I'm okay. Her voice immediately soothes my worries.

"Nanna, the water pipes busted at the dorms today. The shelters here were accommodating as many as they could. We can't get inside to get our stuff or even see if we have anything left."

"Oh, Honey! Do you need me to send you some money? Did you get a bed? What about that roommate of yours?"

Locking the door, I begin to undress. "Actually, Kenzi and I are staying together, but we're not staying at a shelter."

"Did you use some money to get a room somewhere?" I hear the worry in her tone.

“Fisher and Lawson were kind enough to let us use their spare room.”

She coughs into the phone. “Lawson as in Lawson Beck? The same Lawson that you stabbed the eyes out of in your yearbooks and cut his head off of in pictures?”

“Yep.”

“The same Lawson that you cried over every night?”

“Mmhm.”

“The same Lawson...”

“Yes, Nanna, yes. The same Lawson that I have a whole lifetime of history with.”

She tries to hide her amusement unsuccessfully. “Well then, I hope you two can become friends again. Tell that boy I said thank you for putting you up during this mess. If you need money, you better tell me.”

I stare at myself in the mirror attached to the dresser. His shirt is way too big and so are his boxers. I can’t help myself, lifting the shirt to my nose, I inhale his scent. He always smells so good. I roll the boxers a few times to hopefully keep them around my waist and not sliding down my hips. “I will, Nanna, how’s Pawpaw?”

“That stubborn old mule is just fine. I fed him a nice meal and now he’s sitting over there in his recliner fast asleep.”

I laugh for the first time all day. “Tell him I love him, and I love you too.”

“We love you too, Honey.”

Ending the call, I climb into bed. It's soft and so comfortable. I think about the love my nanna and pawpaw have for each other still after being married for as long as they have. That's the kind of love I want. Before I realize it, my eyes are closing and I fall fast asleep.



Chapter Ten

LAWSON

My team belts out the lyrics of “Welcome to My House” while Coach Patterson leads us through the tunnel. Our voices echo off the walls and you can hear the screaming fans waiting for us. The energy vibrating through the stands is surreal. The feeling that engulfs me when I step foot out on our field is indescribable. I take a moment to survey the thousands that sit in those bleachers. *This is what I worked toward my entire life.* A rush of adrenaline pumps through my veins. Accomplishment washes over me in spades. *I did it! I fucking did it!* Pure happiness lights up my face as I walk to the bench. It doesn’t even matter to me that I won’t play, all that matters is I’m here.

I glance back at those bleachers just like I always have. I know the one person I want to see here won’t be, she hasn’t been for a long fucking time. One day she will be again. I waited for that sign that brought her back to me and I got it when those pipes busted at the dorm. That evaporated any doubts I had and sealed her fate. Brinley Ryan is mine and I’m ready to fight that wall she has built up shielding her from me.

I will tear it down piece by piece until nothing is left. Once that happens, I will own her, heart, body, and soul.

I sit on the sidelines and watch the first half of the game. Our team is in the lead by fourteen points. Kendrick has thrown impeccably; he has shown why he's a first-round draft pick. The guy is focused, and every play is calculated perfectly. Rodgers is a defense beast; he blocks Kendrick from getting tackled like his life depends on it. Gentry is unstoppable as a wide receiver, catching every ball thrown his way. The rest of the team are in sync and playing their hearts out.

We listen intently as Coach goes over plays for the second half. "Keep playing like you have been. We're up by two touchdowns and that can change at any minute. Are you going to let them beat us?"

"No, Coach!" we roar and stomp our feet.

"Defense, are you going to let them get past you?"

"No, Coach!" they bellow.

"Offense, are you going to let them stop you?"

"No, Coach!"

"That's what I like to hear! Now, get out there and kick some ass!"

"Yes, Coach!" The locker room goes crazy as he hyped us up.

We run back out of the tunnel after our twenty-minute break, and everyone takes their position. It's the other team's ball first. We don't let them get a first down before it's our ball. Kendrick throws a twenty-yard pass, and the ball is caught. The next play he fakes the throw and passes the ball. The clock runs down with us scoring another touchdown.

At the start of the fourth quarter an interception happens, and we run it into the end zone. The last few minutes they fumble the ball, and we recover it.

The game ends and we win, 35-14.

After showering and getting dressed the team is hyped up. "We're all heading to Wiley's, you coming?" Rodgers asks.

"Nah, I'm going to head home. I'll see you in the morning for practice."

He smiles and nods. "Be prepared. Coach is going to have us eating dirt for going out partying."

"Thanks for the heads up." I laugh while grabbing my duffel bag. Once I'm in my car my phone rings. I already know who it is. "Hey, Dad."

"Son." I hate talking to him after games. "I watched the game. Why weren't you playing?" Here we fucking go. It never fails.

"I'm the backup quarterback, Dad, I'm not going to play unless something happens to Trevor. I'm not the only freshman on the team that's benched right now."

He huffs into the phone. “I don’t care about anyone else. You’re supposed to be playing, that’s why you chose that school. You need to be working harder at practices. You need to do more. Show your coach what you’re made of.”

That’s not why I chose this school, but he doesn’t need to know that. “I’ll try harder.” It’s not worth fighting with him. “I gotta go.” Before he can respond, I end the call.

Entering the apartment, I’m surprised to see Brin sitting on the couch. It’s been a few days since she and Kenzi moved in, but this is the first I’ve seen of her since she came into my room to thank me. Which shocked the hell out of me.

I’ve heard around campus that the damage was worse than expected and it’s going to take longer than originally thought to fix all of the busted pipes. It’s a big building and old, I can only hope that it takes months, or better yet never. Even if it takes weeks, I have no intention of letting her go back to live at the dorm. Thankfully, they were able to get all of their shit out of their room without anything being ruined. I guess with them being on the top floor they got the least amount of damage. Unfortunately, everyone below the fourth floor wasn’t so lucky.

I hate to break it to her, but I’m not letting Brin go again. I don’t care how long it takes or what I have to do to make it happen, ultimately, she is going to end up in my bed and that’s where she’s going to stay. Kenzi can have the spare room to herself, I don’t give a damn. I just need Brin to get on board and realize that she will never be able to say goodbye to me.

My lips quirk as I take this opportunity to just watch her because she hasn't realized I'm here yet. She's trying her best to sing "Sure Thing" by Miguel while propping her foot on the coffee table. She's painting her toes a glittery purple color. God, she's a terrible singer and doesn't know half the lyrics, but she looks so fucking cute trying.

She's beautiful and perfect. Her long silky blonde hair is pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head. There's no makeup to mask her natural beauty. I never understood why she wanted to start wearing that shit in the first place. I think it was around fifth grade, she would sit in front of the mirror practicing with makeup her mom owned. Then there were the nights she called "spa nights". Brin would put this shit on her face and when it dried, she would peel it off. It looked like she was peeling her skin off, it grossed me out.

My gaze roams up her black leggings and oversized shirt. Wait a damn minute, is that the shirt I gave her the other night to wear? It sure as shit is and it looks sexy as fuck on her.

"Hey." I shout so she can hear me over the music. She figured out how to work our stereo.

Her head snaps in my direction. "Hey," she mimics quietly.

I walk over to our entertainment center that holds our stereo, gaming system, and 60-inch flat screen. I turn the volume down then look around our open layout, but don't see Kenzi or Fisher in the kitchen.

"How was the game?" She's talking to me. Actually talking without an attitude, without the snarkiness, without trying to

fight. I'm once again shocked.

I drop my duffel bag onto the coffee table then sit on the arm of the couch further away from her. I don't want to push my luck with trying to sit next to her. "It was good. We won. I didn't get a chance to play, but you know there's no guarantee with me being a freshman and all."

"Congratulations, you'll get your chance. Shouldn't you be out celebrating?"

"I didn't feel like celebrating. Where's Kenzi and Fisher?"

"They went out."

"You didn't want to go?"

"No. I didn't feel like it."

My eyes zero in on the bottle of tequila beside her nail polish. "You having a solo party?"

She grabs the neck of the bottle and takes a sip. "You want some?" She holds the bottle toward me.

Taking it from her, our fingertips touch and it feels like every nerve in my body comes alive. I take a long drink letting the liquor slide down my throat smoothly. I sit the bottle on the table while she is immersed in painting her toes, putting a couple of coats on. This is awkward to say the least. Both of us are silent, yet I don't want to stop talking to her. "How crazy is it that Axel and Merick are getting married?"

She lifts her shoulder nonchalantly. "Crazy, but not surprising. I guess going through something traumatic like

they did puts things into perspective.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m happy for them though. Remember when we were all worried they were finished?”

I see the rise in her lips. “Yeah.”

“Kenzi going to the wedding?” She’s growing on me, I’m still not completely sure about the girl, but Fisher has found himself another best friend.

“I’m not sure. She mentioned going home to Tennessee but that might not be until winter break. She misses her family and animals. If she isn’t going home, I don’t want her to be here alone for Thanksgiving.” She’s from Tennessee, that’s why she has such a strong southern accent. That little bit of information is more than we knew about Dani, maybe Kenzi is alright after all.

“She wouldn’t have to be. She could ride with us. Anything new with the dorm?”

She screws the lid on the polish, her eyes collide with mine. She smiles impishly. Brin is smiling at me, and it shoots straight to my dick. I’m fucking pathetic when it comes to this girl. “You ready to get rid of us?”

“No.” I respond a little too quickly. “I mean you know you can stay here as long as you need to.” *You won’t be leaving.*

She lightly laughs and the sound has my body responding in ways it shouldn’t from a simple sound. She still sounds like an angel. “It’s okay that we stay longer then? Who knows how long it will take to get fixed.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah, of course. Sounds like it might take a while.” Jumping up from the arm of the couch, I blurt, “I’m going to go take a shower.”

“Okay.” Her brows dip like they used to when she was confused by something.

My body is reacting like I’m thirteen again. I already took a shower after the game in the locker room, but I need to get myself calmed the fuck down. I don’t know how she can affect me so easily. One smile, one laugh, one awkward conversation, and my dick is ready to explode. My only explanation is I haven’t been sexual with anyone in any way, shape, or form since the summer before senior year. Once I had the opportunity to be around Brin again and I started apologizing profusely I lost all interest in any other girl. I was solely focused on Brin, and I knew it wouldn’t help me if she saw or heard about me with other girls.

I don’t even see any other girls besides Brin. That girl that sat on my lap at the bar, no effect whatsoever. Not even one tiny twitch, but here I am rock hard because of something so fucking innocent with Brin. I don’t know why she’s being nice, but my dick wants to show her how much we enjoy and appreciate this side of her.

I step inside the shower and close the glass door. The lukewarm water rains down my body. Taking my bottle of body wash, I squirt a nice sized amount of green liquid into the palm of my hand. The scent of Irish Spring wafts through my senses. My soap filled hand coats my dick, my other hand

slaps against the shower wall. I close my eyes as I wrap my fingers around my shaft.

I've never seen Brin naked, but I have a hell of an imagination. I drum up thoughts of how I think her tits look. They would fit perfectly cupped in my hands, perky with tight rose-colored nipples. My hand jerks faster, squelching sounds fill my ears.

I'm thrown into the memory of her mouth. She struggled to take me in, gagging when I hit the back of her throat. How stunningly perfect she looked on her knees, tears leaking from her emerald eyes. "Fuck, Brin!" I groan.

Suddenly, I hear a noise. It sounds like something fell off the counter onto the floor. My head snaps in that direction, through the glass I see the silhouette of Brin bent over picking something up. I open the glass door, she shoots straight up with guilt flashing across her features. My hooded and lust induced eyes lock with hers. I'm not embarrassed or ashamed she caught me, but what was she doing in here to begin with? "Brin, why are you in here?"

"Oh, I was...uh...I." She's tongue-tied and fumbling over the words she's able to form. She's about to bolt. She stumbles back toward the door, ready to run.

"Brin." My tone drops a few octaves with the control I use to say her name. She halts immediately. "Sit down." I'm not asking. I'm demanding her to do so. For whatever reason she came into this bathroom knowing I was in here. There's nothing in here that she couldn't have waited to get. But what

she walked in on made her stay. She wanted to watch, or she would have left instantly. She didn't. Therefore, she's going to watch me finish and she's going to know the reason I'm jacking myself off is because of her. I can't deny having her watch me isn't thrilling, fucking exciting, and an even bigger turn on.

Her cheeks bloom pink, but she lifts herself onto the counter. She has the perfect view; I no longer need to use my imagination. Her gaze diverts to my pierced cock, fixated on the steel barbell through my crown. Brin's tongue glides across her bottom lip. I remember how that tongue felt. Lifting my arm, I grip the frame of the shower door while working my dick with the other. "Fuck!" I hiss. Her eyes shoot to mine only for a second before she's adamantly watching my hand moving up and down in a slow steady pace.

Her lips part, the rise and fall of her chest quickens, she's enjoying this and it's turning her on. My hand works faster, my grip tightens, my breathing matches hers. "Fuck, Brin!" My nostrils flare. That familiar tingling sensation deepens in my spine. Gritting my teeth, white streams jut from my body. As I'm trying to control my breaths, Brin runs from the bathroom. *Shit!*

I clean myself up then cut the water off and step out of the shower. Grabbing my towel off the rack, I dry my body, and run the towel over my hair. While pulling on my gray sweats, I wonder if I should go talk to her about what just happened. Yeah, I probably should. I didn't intend to push past what she's

comfortable with nor do I want her to hate me more than she already does. I need to make sure she's okay.



Chapter Eleven

LAWSON

My fist halts mere inches from her door. I hear heavy breathing and a huskiness in her tone when she utters my name. My eyes widen. Brin is perfectly fine with what happened, in fact, she's in her room trying to get herself off and it's my name she's moaning. My pulse kicks up a notch. Her door could be locked, she would be shutting me out, or it could be unlocked. Trying my luck, I turn the knob, the door creaks open. Brin's lying on her bed with her hair fanned across her pillow. She must have taken her hair down when she threw her leggings on the floor. Her thighs are parted beautifully.

I lean against the doorframe and observe her hand against her pussy. My dick awakens with a fury. "Your fingers can't make you feel what my tongue can." I've wondered a million times what would have happened with us after that night if it all went differently. I've thought about how good she would smell, how sweet she would taste, how tight her pussy would be with me inside her.

Her eyes pop open, head darts toward me, and her fingers still. “I want to taste you, Brin. I’ll make it a rule, I won’t touch you except with my tongue. You going to let me do that?” It’s better for me to say rule than promise because if I can’t follow through, if I lose control, and do touch her she can’t be pissed off and say I broke a promise. She doesn’t respond, but I notice her throat thumping from her increasing pulse rate. I stalk closer, dropping to my knees beside the bed. “Just a taste.” I wait.

Hesitation laced with curiosity crosses her features. She wants this. She wants to know what it will feel like having me eat her pussy. Finally, she succumbs, her needing to come prevails. She gives me a simple nod. I smile wolfishly. “Good girl. Turn your body this way.” She scoots her body sideways. “I need your ass on the edge.” I’m going to try my damndest not to break the rule, I won’t touch her, I’m just going to direct her and hope Brin doesn’t change her mind before I get my tongue on her clit. She listens intently until she’s where I need her. “Spread your thighs and open that pretty pussy for me.”

A deep growl rumbles from my chest at the sight of her. Her pussy is pretty and pink, shining with her arousal. “Already so wet.” I lean in closer; her sweet scent invades my nostrils. “I bet you taste better than you smell.” I situate myself, up on my knees, both hands fisting her chocolate and turquoise comforter, and I lock my eyes with hers. Starting at the back, I trail my tongue upward. I groan when the first taste of her hits me. “Fuck, you taste better than I imagined.”

She lifts her arms above her head and splays her hands against the wall. *That's it, Brin, enjoy it.* Her hips jolt upward when her sweet spot is found. "Oh, God!" she cries. My dick is weeping while I watch how Brin reacts. Every movement, every sound of pleasure, her labored breathing. She's fucking beautiful. With each fervent stroke she grows closer. "Lawson, ah God, Lawson!" Goddammit, I wish I could touch her. Show her how good I could really make her feel. "More please. Faster." *Fuck!* She's begging me and I love how needy she sounds. *Am I dreaming or is this really happening?*

Increasing my tempo and applying pressure, I do as she wishes. I fucking love that she's being vocal. "Right there. Don't stop. Please don't stop." *Never.* She's so goddamn sexy begging me to pull her off the cliff. Her hands slap against my head and her back bows. She's close. So fucking close. I fist her comforter until my knuckles turn white. I want to touch her so fucking bad.

I murmur against her smooth skin, "Brin, eyes on me." Her hooded gaze finds mine. "Put your feet on my shoulders and open as wide as you can." She follows my direction. "That's a good girl," I praise. "Now, watch me eat your pussy." My tongue laps at her clit before I suck her into my mouth. Biting gently on her tight sensitive spot, I torture her with a quick flicking motion.

She screams, "Lawson!" Her mouth drops open and tiny pants of breath expel. Her hips jerk upward while she fists my hair. She drags me closer as she's repeating my name over and over. She explodes on my tastebuds, I've never tasted anything

so delicious. I continue licking her until I've ridden her through the throes of her orgasm.

It doesn't matter that I just came in the shower. I'm so fucking turned on by her. "That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen." She lazily smiles. Standing up, I pull my sweats down just enough that my dick is free. Fisting myself, I tell her, "Pull your shirt up." *Yeah, it's her shirt now.*

"This doesn't make me a whore, Lawson." It guts me that she would say that, but it's my own fault for making her feel that way. She pulls it up over her head but keeps her arms in the sleeves. She's wearing a black lace bra that's stunning against her tanned skin.

"Bra up too." She shoves her bra up to meet her neck. I get the first glance of her large tits and they are perfect. I stroke my cock while watching her tits bounce with every heavy breath she takes. I was right. They would fit perfectly in my hands, actually more than a handful, rose colored and tight perky nipples. "Christ, you're so fucking beautiful. You're not a whore, Brin, you never were. I'm just marking and reclaiming what's always been mine."

I shamelessly come in record time. My orgasm shoots in jetted streams onto her stomach and chest. "Clean it up." She trails her finger through the mess I made then holds it to her tongue so she can lick it off seductively. "Atta girl." Her eyes close as she tastes me. Jesus, she's going to be the death of me. "Stop. We have to stop or I'm going to be breaking the fucking rules tonight." Her shoulders shake with laughter.

She looks thoroughly satisfied with herself; her next words hit me right in the chest in the best way possible. “Thanks for the good time, Lawson.” It’s not because she’s being sarcastic or how gorgeous she looks thoroughly satisfied with sex-crazed hair. It’s because under that sarcasm she enjoyed it, and I made her feel good. She doesn’t hate me for pushing her boundaries yet.

“Yeah, you too.” My chin drops to my chest as I shake my head. I can’t help the grin that’s plastered on my face. Going back into the bathroom, I grab a washcloth and wet it for her then take it to her so she can clean up.

It’s getting late, so I decide to go brush my teeth before heading to bed. I unscrew the cap on my charcoal toothpaste, put some on my toothbrush, and begin brushing. Glancing in the mirror, I do a double take and spit the toothpaste out of my mouth. *What the fuck?*

Like a bell, my brain starts ringing. That’s why she came into the bathroom. “Brin! What the fuck did you do?” I yell loud enough I know she heard me. I storm back to her room, the door crashes against the wall. She’s covered head to toe in her comforter laughing hysterically.

I rip the blanket off her. “Do you see this?” I point to my mouth. “Look at my fucking teeth!”

Her eyes drag to mine guiltily. She sputters and roars with more laughter. “Relax, it’s just paint for your teeth. They’ll be sparkling white again tomorrow night.” She bats her lashes innocently.

I gawk at her like she's lost her damn mind. "Tomorrow night? I have to go all night and day with black fucking teeth? What am I supposed to say at practice tomorrow?"

She bites down on her bottom lip while still cackling. "You can tell them you got owned by the queen of pranks!"

I narrow my eyes in challenge. "Queen of pranks my ass! It's war time, Brinny Baby, don't you forget you started this." When she first moved into my house, we started a prank war, and I would call her Brinny Baby because I knew she hated it. Sammi called her Brinny when we were little and I would tell her Sammi was calling her a baby name. I turned it into Brinny Baby when we were in battle. When it comes to prank wars it's every person for themselves.

I'm sitting on the couch plotting my revenge. Fisher and Kenzi barrel inside drunk and obnoxious. I quickly cover my mouth. Fisher eyes me skeptically. "What's wrong with your mouth? One of those trashy girls give you the herp lip?"

"Shut the fuck up," I mumble behind my hand.

Kenzi tilts her head side to side as she observes me like I'm some kind of science experiment. She wants to move in closer because it's fascinating, but better stay back in case it explodes. "Why you covering your mouth and mumbling? You got something wrong with your face?"

Rolling my eyes, I pull my hand away and show them my full set of black teeth.

Fisher's mouth gapes open, he brings his face close to mine as he inspects my mouth. I'm betting to stop that double vision from drinking too much tonight. He gasps and clinks his finger against my tooth. "What happened? You got black teeth, Lawson."

"No, shit, Sherlock." I jerk my head away. "Brin happened."

Kenzi's still inspecting me like I'm the seventh wonder of the world. "What'chu mean, B, happened?"

"She put paint in my toothpaste to turn my teeth black."

Kenzi doubles over roaring with laughter.

Fisher snickers. "Why would she do that?"

I bite my lip to keep my smile at bay. Don't get me wrong I'm pissed as hell, but damn, it brings back so many memories with her. "When we were kids, we would have prank wars. I beat her every time."

Fisher scratches his head. "So, this is like a game going down memory lane. Ah, shit, maybe she's coming around."

"I'm not going to dwell on that, but I am going to get her back."

Kenzi rubs her hands together. "What's the plan?" Maybe we will be friends after all.

"Can I trust you?" Both nod excitedly. I point my finger dragging it between them. "If either of you speak a word of this to her, I will cut your tongues out. Understood?"

They nod again, both make crosses over their hearts. I stretch over the arm of the couch to make sure Brin's not in the hall. After the events that transpired between us and how hard she came I'd say she's passed out. The three of us put our heads together and I quietly explain the plan.



Chapter Twelve

BRINLEY

Why on earth did I agree to meet my advisor at eight in the morning on a Monday no less? I'm so not a morning person, it was hell getting up every morning for high school. I've taken advantage of being able to sleep in since graduating and none of my classes begin until 10 am.

After getting ready, I trek into the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee. I need caffeine! I've never been a big, flavored coffee drinker, I've always preferred black with a ton of sugar. I appreciate Lawson having a normal coffee pot rather than one of those high-tech fancy Keurig's.

I've walked on eggshells all weekend, waiting for Lawson to get me back for my prank Friday night, but he hasn't. I wonder if he's having trouble coming up with something because shit is weird with us. It was easy as kids, but now not so much.

My prank was a peace offering to ease the tension of us having to live together. Our first prank war started not long after I moved in with him. I didn't want him to hate me for moving into his space and think I was trying to take over his

house. Once I found out one of his favorite pastimes was to prank people, I started a war with him. Of course, I lost, but that's what brought us closer and formed our bond back then.

Friday night, I wasn't trying to get us back to where we were as kids. I just wanted to say maybe we can share the same space again. Maybe it doesn't have to be awkward or filled with tension. Neither of us should have to stay barricaded in our rooms afraid to face the other. Maybe that's more on me than him. I didn't expect him to be home so early or that we would have a pleasant conversation, albeit awkward, it was still pleasant. I couldn't just run away because my toenails were wet from the nail polish and if I would have ignored him that would have been rude, and I would have felt bad. Even though I don't really have a reason to feel bad. He is giving me a roof over my head at the moment. I felt the least I could be is decent.

I was confused by his sudden need to go take a shower. I always thought they took showers in the locker room, but after our conversation I started to feel a bit guilty and second-guessing my decision to put the paint in his toothpaste. The idiot that I am, I thought I could sneak into the bathroom, grab his toothpaste, and leave without him noticing. I was so very wrong.

Once I entered the bathroom, I was hypnotized by his statuesque body. As I perused the sight before me, my heart started thudding against my chest and an intense thrumming built between my thighs while I watched his hand move up and down his massive length. I was trying to grip the counter

to hold myself steady when he moaned my name. I missed what I was trying to hold onto and knocked Kenzi's hair straightener onto the floor.

From there everything escalated, I was out of my mind with this craving and a needy desperation for him as I watched him get off because of me. I don't understand what happened to me, but my God when he came into my room. His mouth, his tongue, the way my body came apart because of him. I had never experienced anything like that, and he was so right my fingers definitely could not make me feel what his tongue did.

Before I get myself worked up any more than I'm already starting to, I check the coffee pot. I've told myself all weekend that could only be a one-time occurrence. We can never do anything like that again. Pouring myself a steaming hot mug, I scoot the container of sugar close and scoop spoonfuls of the sweetness into my cup then give it a good stir. I drop a few ice cubes in the steaming liquid to cool it quickly, so I can drink it fast and be on my way.

Taking a big gulp, coffee sprays out of my mouth. I gag from the taste. That sonofabitch! Storming to his room, I flip the switch. "You changed out the sugar for salt?" I heave from the sour and bitterness in my mouth.

His whole body vibrates with laughter. "Gotcha!" Those dimples make him look even sexier. *Damn him!*

I shoot him with blazing daggers. "You should know better than to mess with a girl and her caffeine." I slam his bedroom door and shout, "Payback's a bitch!"



“Hi, Brinley.”

“Hi, April.” She has helped me tremendously with navigating through all of this college stuff. From the grants and FAFSA application to my class schedule. We did all of our meetings over FaceTime until I moved to Harbor. She had the kindest voice over the phone but meeting her...she is just as kind in person. She's petite with bobbed dark brown hair.

Her matching dark brown eyes wrinkle in the corners as she smiles. “How are your classes?”

“They're good. So far, I'm happy with them and I don't feel like it's too much.” I chose to not take on more than three classes the first semester. I didn't want to overwhelm myself.

“I'm glad to hear that, so we don't need to discuss changing your schedule. Have you thought anymore about what you want to major in?”

“Not really. I just want to focus on the general requirements I need.” The truth is I have no idea what I want to do. I have yet to find a passion for anything. There's nothing I can say with certainty that I would love to do for the rest of my life. For me college was about Lawson and then Sammi. This is what Lawson and I were supposed to do. When he was no longer a part of my life then it became about Sammi's dream. I just wanted out of Cape Cove. The only dream I had was that there was more to life than our small town. I wanted to see what life was like far away from home. She decided to stay in

Cape Cove with Maddox, and I set out on this journey without her. It was supposed to be my fresh start and letting go of Lawson, but we all see how that's turning out. Now, I'm living college life for both me and her.

"That's perfectly fine. You have time to decide. If your classes become too hard or you're needing a little extra help let me know. We can set you up with tutoring or whatever else you need."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." April and I talk for a while longer until she is satisfied that we have covered all we needed to for now.

I still have an hour before my first class, I don't want to go back home, so I opt for the campus library. I can get ahead on my reading for English 101. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I have two classes while on Tuesdays and Thursdays I have one. It seems like an easy schedule, but college courses are harder than high school. There's a lot more work and studying involved. It is nice not having to be in school for eight hours a day though.



Today, I had a long shift at work because one of the other girls called in sick. I didn't even have time to run to the apartment and change beforehand. I could use the extra money, so I had no problem taking the hours. I feel like I should be paying Lawson and Fisher for letting me stay with them. I'm not a freeloader and I don't want to wear out my welcome. Even

though they haven't asked for a dime I would still feel more comfortable paying my way.

It hasn't been nearly as busy at the café since the dorm fiasco. I'm assuming that's due to half the students living off campus for the time being. The ones that don't have vehicles have to take a shuttle bus the university set up, but it only runs at certain times. Before the pipes busted, I was constantly running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Dean wasn't lying when he said it gets busy. I'm thankful I was trained before everyone returned to campus, otherwise I wouldn't know what to do. Tonight was my first night closing; Dean was nice enough to come help and show me what all I needed to do.

It's dark outside by the time Dean and I walk outside. He locks the café door. "Do you have a ride?"

I shake my head breathing in the brisk air. "No, but where I'm staying is a quick walk from here." It's getting chilly at night. I'm going to have to go shopping for winter clothes soon. I'm from California, it's not like we need heavy coats and stocking hats.

"I'll take you home."

"No, it's okay. You were nice enough to take time to come help me."

He grins in that sexy way he does. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm not letting you walk home at night." Dean's silver Enclave is parked behind the café. Sitting in the passenger seat, I shiver with cold chills. I am not made for cold weather and it's not

even cold yet. What the hell was I thinking moving to Massachusetts? “Are you cold?”

Yes. “A little, but it’s fine.”

Dean turns the heat on full blast. “Here. Give me your hands.”

Putting my hands in his, he rubs them together heating me up in more than one way. I should not have dirty thoughts about my boss, but I can’t help it. The guy is seriously sexy.

And then there’s Lawson and what happened between us. I let him cross a line in the heat of the moment, I wasn’t thinking about what the aftereffects would be. Would it be awkward? Would he think things changed between us? How I would feel after. I don’t regret what we did I just don’t know where we go from here. Can I let the past go? Can I maybe start letting him in again and see if we can be friends? Doesn’t what happened Friday take us way over the friend line? This is exactly why I say it can never happen again. Lines get crossed, things get complicated, and someone gets hurt.

Dean follows my directions to the apartment. He parks in an open spot. “Thanks for the ride.”

“You’re welcome.” I grip the handle and I’m about to open the door. “Hey, Brinley?”

“Yeah?” My gaze meets his.

Something flashes in his eyes, but before I can decipher what it was, he shakes his head. “Nothing. Have a good night.”

“You, too.” Hopping out, I run to the apartment.

As I'm stepping inside Lawson is sitting on the couch. His penetrating blue eyes bore into mine. Suddenly, I have this wave of guilt wash over me. Why would I feel guilty? Is it because I think my boss is hot? That's innocent, nothing is happening between us and won't. He's my boss for crying out loud. He might make me feel a certain type of way and I might find him attractive, but that's as far as it would ever go. Like I said, that's one line I won't cross. Or is it because he gave me a ride home? Because he held my hands in his? Maybe a combination of the three. *See, complicated.*

"How was work?"

"Good."

"Did you walk home? You could have called me to give you a ride. I don't want you walking at night."

My heart gallops and belly flip flops with a weird feeling that I did something wrong, but I didn't. Why am I having all these mixed-up feelings? "Dean gave me a ride."

Lawson sits up. Resting his elbows on his knees, he laces his fingers together. "Dean gave you a ride?" He repeats my words.

"Yes."

Those penetrating eyes pierce me with immense emotion. "I'm going to ask you a question, Brin, and I need you to be completely honest with me. Do not lie to me."

My heart pounds harder. "Okay."

“Are you fucking around with your boss?” His head drops, he lifts his thumbs, pressing them against his forehead. It’s like he can’t bear to look at me while waiting for me to respond.

“No.”

Lawson calmly stands from the couch. He strolls toward me. “Then why the fuck is he giving you a ride?” His tone is harsh, and his glaring eyes strike me venomously.

“For the same reason you would have. He didn’t want me to walk home at night.”

He closes the distance, tension crackles between us. “You would have rather gotten a ride from him than calling me?”

His accusatory tone only ignites my anger. “What? No! I had every intention of walking, but he was there and offered me a ride. Simple as that.” I wave my hand toward him. “There’s no reason for you to get all worked up.”

“Simple as that?” he grits through clenched teeth. He takes a step closer. “Get worked up?” I stumble back at his inferno stare and ticcing jaw. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so angry and looking like he’s ready to murder someone. “I think I have every right to get worked up after what happened Friday night. I don’t want him giving you rides.”

My mouth drops open. I cannot believe he just said that. “Don’t throw in my face what happened Friday night! You know as well as I do that neither one of us expected that to happen. And you throwing it in my face is a prime example of why it will never happen again! You don’t get to tell me what

to do. Friday night changes nothing between us.” I breathe deeply, I try to keep calm and keep myself together. I can’t believe he is acting like this after I have sat back and watched him with numerous girls. He thinks he can tell me what to do. *I don’t think so, buddy.*

“It most definitely changes things. Don’t treat me or talk to me like I’m fucking stupid. People see the way you two are together.” His fist slams against his chest. “I saw it with my own goddamn eyes! What I want to know is what does he want with an eighteen-year-old virgin?” I gasp, appalled that he would have the audacity to go there. His fuming eyes search mine. “Tell me you’re still a virgin, Brin.” His nostrils are flaring like a raging bull. “You better be a fucking virgin, or I swear to fucking God...”

I poke my finger repeatedly in his shoulder. “You do not get to ask me that! For years, I sat back and watched you be all over other girls and them be all over you. You sure as hell weren’t saving yourself. My virginity is not your concern and frankly, it is none of your fucking business!” I scream as loudly as he’s yelling at me. I would not be surprised if the people in the surrounding apartments can hear our whole heated argument.

His eyes are bulging and mouth flopping open and closed like a fish. “Not my business? Not. My. Fucking. Business.” He looks like he’s about to lose his damn mind. “You were mine!”

“And you destroyed us! You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t do. You don’t get to tell me who I can and can’t have in my life. You are not my everything anymore, Lawson, and you have no control over me. You do not run my fucking life!”

He stalks closer like I’m the prey he’s hunting. My back hitting the wall halts me from moving. His hands slam the wall on either side of my face. His blue eyes pierce mine. “I’m not going to run your life.” His nose ghosts across my cheek. I feel his hot breath float against the shell of my ear. Goosebumps cover my flesh. He whispers, “I’m going to fucking ruin it so goddamn good, Brin. Don’t ever tell me that won’t happen between us again because I can guaran-fucking-tee you it will.” He’s so close. The smell of his cologne encompasses me. The way he states that matter-of-factly, his voice so deep and dangerous, it’s tantalizing. A moan falls from my lips unintentionally. His words, voice, scent, it flutters through me all the way to my aching core. “Rules broken tonight, Brin.”

I’m trying to think clearly and comprehend what he’s saying. Rules? What rules? Without warning his hands grasp the back of my thighs, I’m lifted into the air, and his lips crash against mine. We devour each other and put everything into this kiss. It isn’t soft and sweet like our first one. No, this kiss is filled with years of yearning. It’s one of those kisses you can feel the passion, devastation, anger, and every other emotion we have ever felt over the years.

My legs automatically wrap around his waist. His tongue sweeps along mine. He tastes good like mint. His massive

bulge presses against my pussy. Unashamedly, I slowly flex my hips to move along his length.

How can I hate him and want him in the same moment? How can I be arguing with him and suddenly need him like I need my next breath? How can he make me so furious then draw me in like a moth to a flame? He has the ability to make everything vanish into thin air. He consumes me, makes me desire things I've never experienced.

His fingers grip my ass cheeks, guiding me rhythmically. He swallows my whimpering sounds. His delicious mouth kisses me desperately like he's trying to erase all others. But he's the only one who has ever kissed me. "Fuck, Brin!" Lawson groans against my lips.

"Holy shit!" Fisher's voice surprises us both.

Lawson drops me immediately. I don't know what comes over me, but I reach up, and slap him across his gorgeous face. His head jerks to the side, his tongue glides across his bottom lip. "Don't touch me again." I storm to my room before anyone can berate me with questions that I don't know how to answer.



Chapter Thirteen

LAWSON

“**W**hat just happened?” Kenzi’s brows pinch, her usual smile and upbeat energy are nonexistent.

“I don’t know,” Fisher murmurs like he’s afraid to be too loud in case I explode. “Lawson?”

“Not right now.” I’m still trying to process what transpired. One minute we’re fighting, the next we’re practically fucking against the wall, and then she slaps the shit out of me. “I need to go talk to her.”

I quietly knock on Brin’s door. She doesn’t answer. Opening it slightly, I peek inside. “Brin?” She’s sitting on her bed, legs crossed, and face buried in her hands. Her shoulders are shaking. “Hey, you okay?”

I lower to my knees and fold my arms on the edge of her bed. Resting my chin on my forearms, I ask calmly, “Why are you crying, Brin? Talk to me.” Fear consumes me. I pushed her too far. Both of us say shit we don’t mean in the heat of the moment, but my heart is thundering at the possibility she regrets what happened between us and that she really did mean it would never happen again. Nervousness swims through my

blood that she's going to say she doesn't want this, doesn't want us, doesn't want me. Pressing my fingers on the bottom of her chin, I turn her tear-streaked face, forcing her to look at me. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm sorry." Her remorse is palpable in the tremble of her lips, crease in her forehead, and the sound of her quiet voice. "I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean to slap you."

My eyes close for a split second, the breath I was holding releases. She's sorry for slapping me. My finger traces along hers until our palms lay flat against one another, I stare at her tiny digits pressed to my larger ones. Slightly moving my fingers between hers, I lace our hands together and bring them to my mouth. I tenderly kiss the top of her hand. "I deserved you slapping me for some of the shit I said to you." I show my vulnerability. "I'm scared, Brin."

"Why are you scared?" My free hand lifts. Brushing my knuckles across her cheek, I wipe away the tears.

Her thumb dusts across mine back and forth, back and forth. I focus on the movement and the gentle caress. "Because I have you somewhat back in my life. I'm so fucking scared someone is going to take you away again or that you're going to say all this is one big mistake and you don't want it anymore."

"I don't regret what happened between us, but I did think that it shouldn't happen again."

"Why?"

“Because it complicates things, and someone is going to get hurt.”

The corners of my lips lift. “When have we ever been easy? Did you like what happened between us the other night?”

Brin nods.

“Did you like the feel of my lips on yours?”

Her head bobs up and down.

“I liked it too a lot. Why can’t we focus on that instead of what you think might happen?”

“Let this just be fun and not think about it too much?”

“Exactly.”

“Once I can move back into the dorms we stop, okay? We keep feelings out of it and just have fun.”

No, that’s not what I meant. There’s no way to keep feelings out of this because there’s already too many feelings involved. I need to make sure that she doesn’t want to leave before those dorms are fixed. I simply agree. “Okay.” I silently vow *I’m going to get us back, Brin.*

Leaning forward, I press my lips to her forehead. “Goodnight, Brin.”

“Goodnight, Lawson.” I head to my room. I’m not going to dwell on the fact we’re borrowed time to her, but I am going to continue to fight to ensure she stays mine. That boss of hers can go fuck himself if he so much as thinks he can have her.



The crowd goes wild as the time clock buzzes ending the game. We won, 21-7. We beat them on their own turf, giving us an undefeated season so far. If our team keeps playing the way we are there's no doubt we'll make it to the championship this year.

My phone is ringing before I even open my locker. "Hey, Dad."

"Another game and you weren't on that field. Why the hell am I paying for you to live there?" He's not paying, my mom is.

My dream is to play for the NFL, but it would be stupid of me to put all my eggs in one basket. "I don't know, Dad, maybe so I can further my education." If I got hurt and couldn't play anymore, what would I fall back on? That's why I'm majoring in sports medicine. He doesn't see it that way though. Once I started playing football, he had a one-track mind when it came to me.

"You're not doing enough. Work harder and maybe that coach of yours will see you're worth something. Sitting on that bench like a lazy son of a bitch isn't going to get us to the prize." There it is *us*; what the fuck is he doing? Nothing. He doesn't see how fucking hard I'm working or how much effort I'm putting in. I'm a freshman and at the bottom of the totem pole here. Next year will be different. I won't be this small fish

in a big pond anymore and then I'll have three years to show my dedication to the game.

"Our team is undefeated. That's all that matters." I'm no longer the star player I was in high school. In college there's players better than you; bigger, faster, more experienced. Just like Kendrick told me and since starting the season I've witnessed that myself watching from the sidelines.

"No, that's not all that matters. You playing is what matters. If you sit on that bench the rest of the season you will transfer schools by next semester." *No, I fucking won't.* "When you're home for Thanksgiving you're going to sit and watch every game and tell me every mistake you see made."

I'm calling Maddox to see if I can stay with him and Sammi. No way am I spending hours watching recorded games. I did it all through middle and high school. I'm not doing it now especially when I'm no longer living under his roof. I'm also not going to let him control my life or dictate how I live it.

"Fine." I was starting to get homesick and counting down the days until we were back in California, but he just ruined that. Ending the call, I throw my phone in my duffel bag, and think about what it's going to be like when we do go back home. Is that going to make Brin distance herself from me again? Are those memories going to come flooding back in to remind her that I was an asshole?

Over the last couple of weeks, I haven't seen much of Brin. She's picked up hours at the café which I don't particularly

like. In fact, I hate her working there because I'm a jealous fuck and I don't want her boss getting any closer to her than he already has. I can't tell her to quit because she likes her job and if I did that, I would only push her away.

Coach claps his hands loudly breaking me away from my thoughts. "Hustle. Hustle. Hustle. We need to get back to the bus and get on the road!" We have a thirty-minute ride back to Harbor. Pulling the towel off my waist, I slip my boxers on first then finish getting ready.

By the time I take my seat on the bus my junk is feeling funny. My brows knit with confusion. I tug at the waist of my jeans and boxers, but that makes it worse. *What the fuck?* It feels like tiny little hairs prickling my skin. Glancing around, I make sure no one is looking my way. I fist my jeans and rub against my shit, fucking hell, it itches. The more I scratch the more it fucking itches. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Toby Rodgers slowly sits beside me. "You good, man?"

I grunt while continuing to rub my jeans against my junk. It's excruciating. "No, I'm not fucking good. What the fuck was wrong with their towels?"

Biting his knuckle, Toby side-eyes me and snickers. He glances around at our teammates. "Looks like you're the only one having this problem. Maybe it's more of a, what did you stick your dick in rather than a towel problem."

"Fuck you!" I grit through clenched teeth. I haven't stuck my dick anywhere.

I'm itching like fucking crazy. It's ten times worse than it was when we left on the bus. Throwing the front door to the apartment open, I fling my duffel bag onto the floor, and dance around the living room. I need some relief from this shit, it's almost unbearable and makes me want to break down in tears like a little bitch.

I don't even give a fuck that the three of them are lined up on the couch gawking at me like I'm a lunatic. I undo my jeans and scratch my shit while still hopping around. Beads of sweat coat my forehead, that's how intense this fucking itching is.

Fisher opens his big mouth. "What's wrong with you? You have an infestation of lice down there?"

Kenzi sputters, "Those trashy girls didn't give him the herp lip, Fisher, they gave him those little biting bugs."

I rip my shirt over my head. "I swear to fucking God, you two are the biggest assholes I know!" Glancing at Brin, her hands cover her mouth, she's howling with laughter. It all suddenly clicks. Glaring, I accuse her. "You did this! You fucking did this to me!" I cry as I run to the bathroom and quickly turn the water on. I don't wait for the water to warm up before I jump in. Sighing with relief because the itching immediately vanishes, I slide down the shower wall and let the water wash away whatever kind of itching powder Brin put in my boxers.

It's been a couple of weeks since the salt prank, I thought she had given up. Apparently, Brin stepped up her game. I

guess I need to do the same.



Chapter Fourteen

LAWSON

I'm lying in my bed listening to "Bruises" by Lewis Capaldi when I hear a knock. "Yeah?"

Brin closes the door behind her and leans against it. "Did you get the itching to stop?" She bites down on that sexy plump lip to hide her wicked smile.

Standing up, only in my black boxer briefs, I stalk toward her. "You're playing dirty, you know that?" Desire and hunger flood her emerald depths. My nose skims the column of her neck, her scent invading, and her breath hitches. "I think I need to play just as dirty." Wrapping my arm around her waist, I lift her off the floor. Her legs enclose around my hips. I walk us to my bed and throw her onto the mattress. Covering her body with my own, I hold my weight up with my hands on either side of her head. "Can I touch you?" I don't know why I'm asking, I already touched her. Maybe I need clarification that she actually does want me to kiss her again and I won't get slapped for it this time.

"Broken rules, remember?" Our lips touch, soft and gentle, unhurried and sensual. My tongue brushes across the seam of

her mouth, coaxing her lips to part. The first touch of our tongues deepens the kiss. The yearning, passion, and hunger igniting between us, our bodies come alive. In a synchronized rhythm we rock against each other. My boxer briefs and her cotton shorts keep a barrier between us.

Rolling to the side, I break our kiss. Pulling her shirt and bra up to her neck, a feral sound erupts from deep in my chest at how perfect she is. "If you want me to stop, tell me." How is it possible she is even more beautiful than the first time I saw her bare? I silently beg for her not to tell me to stop.

Brin's fingers weave through the back of my hair. "I'm still a virgin, Lawson." My heart slams into my chest like a hurricane. Thank fuck! She adds, "I'm not ready to have sex."

In this moment, I realize how selfish I truly am when it comes to her. It shouldn't matter if she is a virgin or not, I fucked my way through Cape Cove High. I wouldn't not want her if she gave up her v-card, but the thought of her fucking someone else makes me feel murderous. If that makes me an asshole so be it. Deep down, no matter what shit happened, Brin has always been mine. Every fucking part of her is mine.

I nod. "Okay." I only want to do what she's comfortable with. I'm not going to force her into something she's not ready for. I'm okay with waiting because I want her to completely, undoubtedly, and irrevocably trust me when it happens. I want her to know I'm never going to hurt her again.

Lowering my head, I circle her tight pebbled nipple before sucking it into my mouth. The whispered moans and the way

her hand tries fisting my short hair tells me she's enjoying this. Releasing her from my mouth, I trail my tongue across the valley of her tits and lavish the other with the same attention.

I pepper kisses along her collarbone and the groove of her neck. I breathe in her fruity scent, letting its intoxication drown me. "Take your shorts and panties off."

My mouth crashes with hers, our hungry tongues explore and devour. A primal need and desperate craving possess us. She scurries, fumbling to get her clothing off. Hooking my fingers into the waistline, I rip the offending material down her legs and let them fly across the room.

I trace her silky-smooth skin with featherlight touches of my fingertips, from the top of her foot until I reach the curve of her hip. "Open for me." Her thighs fall, spreading wide. My fingers roam across her quivering belly and down. I cup her satiny soft pussy, pushing a digit inside. Her mouth falls open as a hushed gasp escapes. "You're so fucking tight." My cock hardens to an almost painful level as her wet heat drenches with arousal.

Brin hums quietly. "That feels good."

"What about this?" The pad of my thumb circles her clit.

"Yes." She nods.

To my surprise Brin reaches over. Inserting her hand beneath my boxers, her thumb gently glides along the slit of my cock. She massages beads of precum over the head, a tickling sensation causes me to shiver. Her thumb plays with

my piercing. “Fuck, Brin.” I breathe her name like she’s my survival. She stops only to tug on my boxer briefs. With my free hand and lifted hips, I help her remove them. “Open the drawer of my nightstand. I have lube in there.” She pours a good amount on her hand then fists as much of my shaft as she can. “Shit, your hand feels good.” A hell of a lot better than my own. And definitely better than any other girl that’s ever touched me. My lips descend on hers; I add a second finger causing her to cry out. Her hand jerks me in quick precise motions.

We’re held hostage by our locked stare, everything around us blurs until it’s just me and her. The only sounds heard are our mingled breaths and the lyrics of “Love Is Gone”. Our impending orgasms intensify throughout our bodies. Her fist around me tightens, her legs tremble. “You gonna come for me?” She whimpers incoherent words. “That’s it, Pretty Girl.” I push into her with languid pumps of my fingers.

I focus on the feel of her delicate hand wrapped around me and her walls clenching so tightly. My width prevents her fingertips from touching all the way around, but she’s doing a damn good job. I imagine what it would feel like if it was my cock blanketed inside her instead of my fingers fucking her with rapid thrusts, and the fervent massaging of her sensitive little clit. My spine tingles and balls grow heavy.

“Lawson,” she mewls my name. She’s so fucking close.

“Look at you, so fucking perfect, and ready to explode all over my hand. I want to taste that sweetness, Pretty Girl.” I

draw her climax in with my words. Her head lolls back on my pillow, her free hand fists my comforter. I growl through clenched teeth, “That’s my good fucking girl. Show me how much you love me finger fucking you.”

“I’m going to come.” She moans breathlessly.

“Come with me, Pretty Girl. Let me see how perfect you look when you fucking lose it.” Her tight little cunt is sopping.

She covers her mouth to hold back her increased sounds of pleasure. “Fuck! Lawson!” She elongates her words as her pussy pulsates and she falls.

“That’s it,” I grit. “Fucking beautiful! My good girl soaked my fingers, and I can’t wait to taste how fucking sweet you are.” My release slams through my body making me lose all sense. “Brin,” I groan as her hand fills with pearlescent ribbons of cum. I don’t remove my fingers until her aftershocks have subsided. Putting them in my mouth, I suck them clean. “Fuck, you taste good.”

“That was good.” She lazily and happily smiles.

“I’m glad you think so.” I chuckle, pressing my lips against her temple before standing, and finding a clean towel in my closet. We don’t have a space in our bathroom for towels, so we keep them in our rooms. I hand it to her and climb back into bed.

Brin wipes her hand clean and passes the towel to me. “I should go back to my room.” She jumps from my bed quickly, but I don’t let her get far.

Leaning up, I grab hold of her wrist. Her eyes collide with mine. “Stay.” I add, “Just for a while.” I don’t care if I sound pathetic, I don’t want her to go. I’ve never begged a girl to stay with me, but I’ll get on my knees and worship at her feet if that’s what it takes to keep Brin in my bed for just a little while longer. I’m not ready to let her go yet.

Her eyes drift between me, the bed, and the door, decision made when she climbs beside me. We lay on our sides facing each other. I splay my hand on her exposed hip, brushing my thumb back and forth across her flesh. “Was it good for you?” She breaks our silence.

My brows furrow with confusion. Of course, it was, why would she even need to ask that? “It was better than good, Brin, it was amazing.” I know we didn’t have sex, but from her I will take anything she’s willing to offer. I’m not just talking about sexual either. These little pieces of her I see shining through are breathtaking. I’ll take any scraps she throws out because that means her hate for me is slowly dissolving.

“I’ve never done any of this with anyone,” she confesses and my heart thunders in my chest.

“You mean sexually?” I question further. I need to know exactly what we’re talking about here.

“Yes, and everything else. You’re the only one who has ever kissed me, held my hand, touched me.”

I’m taken aback for a moment, but the exhilaration this brings me is undeniable. “Why? You’re a gorgeous girl, Brin. I

heard all the guys in high school talk about how hot they thought you were. I might have knocked a few of them out because of it.” I laugh lightly. “But you could have anyone you wanted.”

“I never wanted them. I was yours and you were mine until you weren’t anymore. Then freshman year happened, and I hated you and the farthest thing from my mind was boys. Shit got worse with Sammi, and I was constantly worrying about her. I didn’t know what she was doing to herself and that made me feel like a shitty friend for not seeing the signs. You started coming around senior year, but I couldn’t get past what you did to me and add in all the years I watched you with other girls fueled that rage I had built up.”

My stomach lurches with guilt and remorse of what all I put her through. Her pooling orbs shine with emotional turbulence. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve said it a million fucking times, but you will never know how truly fucking sorry I am. What happened to us?”

Her cheeks puff with air before she blows it out. “Our parents happened.”

Rolling over onto my back with one arm behind my head, I use my other to tug Brin closer. She lays with her head on my chest and leg over mine. Pulling her shirt up, my fingers trace her spine with featherlight touches. “My dad’s a dick.” He played both of them like fiddles. He was cheating on my mom with Brin’s for months before my parents called it quits. Then started an affair with my mom before splitting with Brin’s.

He's an asshole to the ninth degree, but my mom isn't much better. It's all about our family name and reputation with her.

Brin trails her fingernails along my side where I have saint tattooed in the same style as sinner on my opposite side. "My mom and your parents were all in agreement that we were to never have anything to do with each other again. They didn't give a shit what that would do to us, nor did they care to ask us how we felt. They were all selfish."

I press my lips to the crown of her head. "I agree. Your mom and my dad wanted us to form this brother/sister bond and if we would have done that, after seven years they expected us to just say okay that's it you guys are done so we will be too. But fuck, the bond we had, it was never brother and sister at all. It was so much deeper. What happened after the day they told us?" Her next words throw me into a whirlpool of guilt.

We lived in a nice colonial style home with thick white columns and a brick exterior. Two stories tall, a green landscaped yard, and more space than four people needed. Mom opens the door to the tiny one-bedroom apartment. "This is where we're living now?" My lip curls in disgust. I'm already mad at her for packing all our stuff and telling me I'm not allowed to talk to Lawson anymore. She can't do that! I can't not talk to him! For seven years we've lived together, been inseparable. He's my best friend in a different way than Sammi is. I love Lawson and he's going to be the boy I marry one day. I will never stop loving him.

“It’s the best I can do, Brinley.”

“I can talk to Lawson and maybe he can talk to Brad. We could move back into the house if you guys stop fighting and work it out.”

Mom takes hold of my elbow, leaving reddened imprints of her fingers. She pulls me to the used couch, that whoever lived here before left, then she jerks my arm, knocking me down onto the couch. “I told you that you will not have anything to do with him or so much as speak to him again.” She bends, leveling her eyes with mine. Tears blur my sight, but her anger is visible. “Understand?”

I shake my head furiously. “No! You can’t do that! You can’t take him away from me!”

“I just did.” She paces the small living room floor. “I have eyes and ears everywhere in this town, Brinley. If I so much as catch wind that you have spoken or even looked in Lawson Beck’s direction, I will send you to live with your aunt in Texas.”

Aunt in Texas? I knew Mom had a sister that lived there, but I have never met the woman. How could she do this to me? “I hate you! I will never forgive you for this!” Tears roll down my cheeks. Jumping from the couch, I race to the door, and fling it open. I run and don’t stop running until I’m knocking on Sammi’s door. My heart feels like it’s being squeezed. I try to suck in a lungful of air, but it’s not enough. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe without him. If I lose Lawson, I won’t survive.

My jaw tics. “She was going to ship you off to someone you had never met just because you talked or looked at me?” Her mom is a fucking bitch. I never cared for her, but I tolerated her for Brin. This right here makes me hate the fucking woman. “The anger they had for each other was taken out on us. It wasn’t fair to either of us. They were supposed to be the adults, but they were acting like children. Little kids that snatched their toys away and would rather throw it in the trash than let the other have it.”

“We both knew the divorce was coming, but I didn’t expect my whole life to be shattered in the process. I went to Sammi’s and emptied my heart out to her. I was Sammi’s only friend, she couldn’t lose me as much as I couldn’t lose either of you. The months ahead only got worse.”

It’s been four months since we moved into this horrible apartment. The people around us are loud, especially at night. I have to wear earplugs just to be able to fall asleep. Our apartment is dirty all the time because Mom doesn’t clean. I clean up after myself the best I can, I cook my own food, and I figured out how to use the complex’s washer and dryer to wash my clothes. I have turned into the adult because she won’t get up off the used-up couch. Day in and day out, I get home from school, and she’s passed out with an empty bottle or two beside her.

I miss Lawson. I miss him every day and it hurts so badly that he continues to try and talk to me, but I have to run away. I can’t be sent away because if I am then I lose him completely.

I just need to get through the next six years and then I can explain everything, and we can still keep our pact.

“Wait, Brin, stop.” Her eyes pool with tears as she stares up at me. I blink several times trying to hold my own at bay. I don’t cry ever, but this shit has me fucked up in the head. “When we lived together, your mom liked to drink wine. She got worse? She put on this show of the perfect Stepford wife for my dad, but then neglected you?” She confirms what I’ve just said with a slight nod. “You thought once we turned eighteen, we could be together, and our pact would remain intact?”

She sniffles. “Yeah, I realize how stupid that sounds now, but I was a twelve-year-old girl.”

My forehead creases with my mounting confusion. “Why didn’t you just have Sammi talk to me?”

Her brow arches like she can’t believe I just stupidly asked that question. “Really? When would you have even given Sammi a chance to talk to you?” She has a point. I wouldn’t have given her the time of day to talk to me. I hate to even admit this, but I was one that laughed at Sammi’s bullying and I won’t deny that I participated a few times. It’s no excuse, but I wanted to watch her suffer and hurt out of my jealousy over Brin. I was hurting and angry, I let those feelings pour onto Sammi because she had Brin in her life, and I didn’t. Brin continues, “Besides, I did think about doing that, but my mom instilled it in my head so many times what she would do. I became paranoid about it. I was scared she would find out I

was having Sammi relay messages to you and she would have forbidden me to speak to her as well. Then my mom would have moved me thousands of miles away.”

I run my free hand over my face, I feel disgusted with what I’m hearing. I thought my parents were bad, but they don’t have shit on her mom. Brin was so brainwashed I can see why she was scared. “Jesus, that’s so fucked up. I hated my parents for telling me not to talk to you, but it was always about the reputation of our family bullshit, head trips, and egos.” I mock my mom’s voice. “How would it look for my son to be seen with that homewrecking whore’s daughter?” I swipe my hand over my hair. “I never understood why she put all the blame on your mom. My dad’s the one who should have thought about his family.” My fingertips caress her cheek. “I can’t imagine what you went through over those six years with her.”

“It wasn’t six years,” she deadpans.

The further we get into this the more confused I become, and questions flood my mind. “What do you mean?”

Summer is almost over; I’ll be in high school in a few weeks. Four more years and I’ll be eighteen. I’ve watched Lawson kiss girls and hold their hands; it hurts more than anything in this world. He’s no longer waiting for me. He gave up trying to talk to me and I understand why, it’s because he gave up on us. I wish so desperately that he could see I didn’t give up on us though. If he could just see.

Mom drunkenly stumbles into the kitchen while I’m washing the dishes I used to cook my dinner. “What is this?” She

throws the shoebox onto the floor; folded pieces of paper fly out and land on the linoleum.

My eyes widen in shock at the same time my heart sinks into the pit of my stomach. I had that box stuffed into the back of my closet. She went through my room; she invaded my privacy. "I told you not to have anything to do with him! You're a disgusting whore!" Spit flies from her drunken mouth. She almost falls over when she bends to pick up one of the pieces of paper. She throws it at my face. "You're nothing but a little slut who wanted to fuck her stepbrother." Before I can register what is happening her hand connects with my cheek. White hot pain sears through my face. I didn't write anything like that, all I said was that I loved him. I might have mentioned our one and only kiss, but that gives her no right to call me names or slap me.

I race out of the apartment and run to Sammi's house. Luckily, it's her that opens the door and not her parents. I don't want to have to explain to them. "Brin, what happened?"

Tears slide down my cheeks. "My mom slapped me." Sammi wraps her arms around me and pulls me inside her house. "I can't believe she hit me."

"I'm so sorry." Sammi sits beside me on her couch. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need to use your phone." I dial the number I have memorized.

"Hello?"

Her sweet voice comforts me. "Nanna." I wipe away the falling tears.

"Why do you sound upset? What happened, Honey?"

"Can I come live with you and Pawpaw?"

"What did she do to you?" Nanna sounds worried. Nanna and Pawpaw are Mom's parents, but even they know Mom hasn't been a mother to me the last couple years. They are the reason I have clothes and shoes that fit, food in my belly, and a roof over my head. Pawpaw says that's his daughter and he loves her, but the only reason he helps her is because of me. If I wasn't there, they would cut her off until she got the help she needs.

"She hit me." I rub my burning, tender cheek and sob into the phone.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at my friend, Sammi's." She knows the address since she's brought me here before.

"Okay, Honey. I'll be there soon. I'm sending your grandpa over to get your things. Everything is going to be just fine."

"You moved in with Evelyn and Larry? What happened with your mom?"

She shrugs her shoulder. "I don't know. I haven't spoken to her since that night."

"Why did your mom think you had been talking to me? What was in the box?"

I feel her breath against my chest. I have no doubt she can feel how hard my heart is pounding with the wave of emotions assaulting me. “It was a box of letters. I couldn’t talk to you, so I wrote you letters every time I had something to tell you, or when I just needed you there.”

And now my heart stops. “You wrote me letters? Where are they now?”

She glances up at me sheepishly. “I burned them.” No, she didn’t. I know Brin and she wouldn’t have done that. She either has them here in her room somewhere or they’re at her grandparents’ house. I’m going to get those letters.

“Wait. You moved in with them right before we started freshman year.” Realization slams into me like a wrecking ball. “Trent had the back-to-school party, and I fucking did what I did. Goddammit! You were trying to get us back. Why didn’t you talk to me before that like when school had first started?”

Brin’s gaze narrows. She grumbles, “Because you were dating that bitch, Bethany.”

I nod in agreement. “And we broke up the day of the party. You should have talked to me! I would have dumped her or any other girl the minute you opened your mouth. Christ, even before you could have gotten a word out, they would have no longer existed.”

Once again, she shrugs nonchalantly. “You seemed to have moved on, but then you came into the room I was in, and I

thought that was our chance. But it wasn't. That night everything happened so fast."

"Do you still hate me?"

She purses her lips as if she's contemplating the question. "I'm going to say I have a very strong dislike of you."

I grin wickedly. "I guess the orgasms are working in my favor."

She laughs against me. "You might be right, but I think I might need some more to be sure."

"I think I can handle that." I sweep my tongue along the seam of her lips. "Did you mean it when you said you wished you never met me?"

Brin's fingers trail through my hair. "No. I'm sorry for a lot of stuff I've said to you."

"I'm sorry too. It's a good thing we know each other because we say a lot of fucked up shit to each other when we're pissed."

Brin throws the comforter off her and tries to get out of bed. "Oh my God! This will never work! We're toxic as fuck!"

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I tug her into me. "Think of the orgasms." My mouth latches onto the side of her neck and my fingers tickle her rib cage.

She giggles and squirms. "Stop!"

"I wouldn't want to be toxic with anyone else," I whisper against her ear.

“Me either.” Her fingers lace through mine.

I never let Brin go back to her room and we fall asleep to the sound of Harry Styles singing “Falling”.



Chapter Fifteen

BRINLEY

Sunrise was at approximately 6:05 this morning, but that's not what woke me up. No, what woke me was forgetting where the hell I was for a moment. Then realizing I stupidly fell asleep in Lawson's room, and it was hotter than Satan's asshole in this bed. His hard body was pressed against my backside, it wasn't just his body that was hard. His bulging erection was like an oversized hotdog and my ass cheeks were the bun. His rough calloused hand was splayed across my bare stomach, my shirt had ridden up to my boobs, and my body was responding to it all. I tapped that craving down deep. I don't think it would be a good idea waking him up to get more orgasms. He might read too much into what's happening between us even though we have a deal. We're having fun until I'm able to move back into the dorms.

I should have left right then, but instead, I rolled over and tucked my hands between the pillow and my cheek. That's how I've been laying for the last two hours watching Lawson sleep. I've memorized every feature of his gorgeous face, the way his strong jawline under his facial hair tenses even in his sleep, like his dreams keep him from sleeping peacefully. His

thick black lashes flutter ever so slightly like he might wake up but never does. His full lips part only a fraction before closing completely. I lost count of his breaths while watching the evenly measured rise and fall of his perfectly chiseled torso and abs. The blanket is scrunched low on his hips giving me an unobstructed view of his defined V and the dusting of hair from his happy trail that disappears under the comforter.

I ease my way out of his bed. Finding my shorts and panties, I quickly slip them on. Like a quiet little mouse, I sneak out of his room and scurry to mine. Luckily, Kenzi is sound asleep. I gently slide in beside her and close my eyes, willing sleep to encompass me. If not, I'm going to be one grumpy bitch today.

Watching Lawson sleep, I could still see some of that boy I once knew underneath the man he's grown to be. I had to memorize that moment and him because I can never let myself sleep next to him again. I'm glad we talked, but that doesn't change the past. We can't go back in a time machine and undo what's already been done. If we could things would be different. But we can't.

We can have fun while I'm living here, but once I'm able to go back to the dorms that fun will need to come to an end. I can trust Lawson with my body, he proved that last night. He didn't force me to do anything I wasn't ready for and when I told him I wasn't ready for sex he simply said okay, no questions asked.

I might be able to trust him with my body, but I can't trust him with my heart. I can't trust that he won't destroy me again. I wouldn't survive it a second time. I can never give him all of me again. I need to keep telling myself that because he makes it so easy to want to fall but the outcome would shatter me completely.



My lids flutter open, I must have fallen asleep. Reaching for my phone I had left on the nightstand last night, I glance at the time while rubbing my tired eyes. It's early afternoon, but I see Dean has called me a few times. My stomach growls from hunger, I need food.

Taking my phone with me, I trek to the kitchen. Lawson's sitting on one of the stools. His eyes meet mine; a slow smirk pulls at his lips and those dimples make an appearance that has butterflies swarming my belly. "Hey."

"Hey." Scouring the cabinets and fridge, I settle on a turkey sandwich, some sour cream and onion Pringles, and a bottle of water.

Plopping onto a stool next to Lawson, he reaches over giving my thigh a gentle squeeze. I pull up my missed call log and tap on Dean's number. He answers after the first ring. "Brinley, I'm going to need you to come in tonight and cover Rachel's shift."

I close my eyes and sag with disappointment. I've picked up so many shifts lately and this was going to be my only day off.

I was looking forward to just lounging around the apartment. “What time?” How does this girl still have a job? She calls in all the time.

“Four to eight.”

“Okay, I’ll be there.” Ending the call, I glance at the time. It’s three now. I need to hurry up and eat then hop in the shower.

I don’t like seeing what seems to be disappointment etched across Lawson’s face. “You’re going to work? This was your only day off.” The sullen tone of his voice confirms his disappointment.

“I know.”

“He’s working you too much, Brin. You’re going to start falling behind in your classes. Why can’t someone else work?”

I shrug. Honestly, I don’t know why someone else can’t, probably because I never say no. Lawson is right though, if I continue to work like this I’m going to fall behind and I don’t want that. “I don’t know. It’s only until eight. I can handle that.”

His hand reaches out taking mine, he weaves our fingers together. “Why are you continuously picking up shifts?”

I stare at him dumbfounded. “So I can have money. I need to pay my way, especially since I’m staying here.”

“No, you fucking don’t. I’m not taking your money, Brin, and Fisher won’t either. Besides my parents and Fisher’s split the rent payments and all the bills here.” Lawson has never

had to want for anything. He doesn't know what it's like to try and survive with nothing.

Sure, I had my grandparents that helped me when I needed them. But I could go days without food before I broke down and made those calls for some groceries. My clothes became too tight and too short before I asked them for new ones to wear to school. I would wear holes in my shoes before I gave in and asked for a new pair. The eviction notices taped to the front door and the disconnect letters for the electricity and water gave me no choice but to ask for more money. Once I moved in with my grandparents, I had everything I needed, but they taught me you have to work for your wants. They taught me hard work and responsibility while my time at the apartment taught me the value of a dollar. Life isn't fair and it sure as hell isn't free.

"That's all the more reason I need to pay my way. I am not going to have your mom and dad front my way. Jesus, do they even know Kenzi and I are staying here?"

He looks down at his bottle of water. He wants me here, but he has no plans to tell his parents because he knows how they would react.

I snort. "That's what I thought. I'm not talking about this anymore." Losing my appetite, I go get my things and begin to get ready for work.



It's been a busy night at the café and I'm trying to stay focused, but it's hard. Between my now growing stomach pains from not eating breakfast or lunch to the somersaults it's doing because of my nervousness in telling Dean I can't keep working so much, I want to vomit. My head is pounding and I feel almost faint.

With a fake bright smile, I scoot the cup across the counter. "Here's your mocha with caramel syrup and whipped milk."

The woman gives me a disgusted look and turns her nose up at me. "I didn't order whatever that is. I ordered a double espresso with chocolate syrup and oat milk."

My smile falls. "I'm so sorry. I'll redo it right now."

She scoffs, "I've already been waiting five minutes."

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. I've messed up so many orders tonight. Before I can tell her how sorry I am again Dean says, "Nick, redo the order and close tonight. Brinley, clock out and come with me." Anxiousness chokes me. Is he going to fire me? It wouldn't surprise me.

Dean's waiting by the front door after I grab my coat and purse. He holds the door open; we step out into the cool night air. "I messed up so much tonight, I'm so sorry. Are you going to fire me?"

His lips twitch at my comment, but he doesn't immediately respond. Placing his hand on my back, Dean ushers me to his car. "I'm not firing you. We all have bad nights." He opens the passenger side for me.

Once he's in the driver's seat and starting the ignition, I ask, "What are we doing?" My stomach decides this is the perfect time to growl angrily. My cheeks blossom pink.

Dean lightly chuckles. "Your stomach has been growling all night, Brinley. I'm going to take you to get something to eat and then I'll take you home."

Thoughts of how pissed Lawson was last time flash through my mind. "You don't need to do that. I can get something to eat at home."

Dean smiles. "It's my pleasure. Besides I want to say thank you for all the hard work you've been doing and coming in whenever I need you." Great! Guilt knots in my already pissed-off stomach. How can I tell him I'm going to stop now?

When Dean said he wanted to get food I assumed he meant at a drive-thru McDonald's or Taco Bell or something. I had no clue he meant sitting down at a restaurant with a burning candle on the table and the atmosphere of romance. But here we are. *Shit on a stick, what is happening right now?*

"Um...Dean?"

"Brinley?"

I lean over the table. "We could have just gone to get some fast food."

His lip curls like he smells something rancid. "Why? This is one of the best restaurants in Harbor." That may be, but I was not expecting this. I was not prepared for this. I'm in my work clothes with coffee splattered all over me. Why would he bring

me to a place like this without even asking me? Dean reaches across the table taking my hand in his. My gaze darts between our joined hands and his face. Lawson flashes through my mind. “I wanted to show my appreciation for all the hard work you’ve been doing. You’re better than a two-dollar burger at McDonald’s.” *What’s wrong with a two-dollar burger?* I happen to love their double cheeseburgers, they have the best fries, and don’t get me started on their spicy McChicken.

Something about this whole situation isn’t sitting right with me. I pull my hand from his. Grabbing my folded cloth napkin, I lay it across my lap. I know I’ve said how hot I think Dean is and that there was something festering when we work together, but he’s my boss. I never had any intentions of crossing any lines with him. Besides, I know how Lawson feels about Dean and any other guy for that matter when it comes to me. I want to respect Lawson’s feelings while I’m living with him. I like where we are right now, I don’t want anything or anyone jeopardizing that. When I’m back in the dorms we’re both free to do whatever we want.

“Thank you, but this really wasn’t necessary.” A boss should not be taking his employee out to dinner at expensive restaurants. If he wanted to thank me a card would have done the trick.

“Look at your menu and pick something to eat.” His demanding tone sets off red flags and alarm bells.

It’s sexy and a major turn on for me when it’s Lawson being demanding and all caveman like, but I have known him my

whole life. I don't know Dean. Maybe I'm just being paranoid because of what happened with Dani. Dean did give me a ride home, he was nice, and didn't try any funny business. Maybe I'm just overthinking this whole situation and I really am just being paranoid.

I glance over the menu. My eyes widen at the prices of the food, it is outrageous, but I'm going to keep that to myself.

When the waitress comes to our table, I order their Hawaiian chicken with a side salad, and baked potato. Dean orders a rib eye with a salad and baked potato as well. He adds an order of oysters for an appetizer.

"The café will be closed over Thanksgiving break. Will you be staying here?"

"No." I don't miss the flash of disappointment on his handsome face. "I'm going back home because my friends are getting married."

His brow arches quizzically. "Your friends?"

I take a sip of my water and nod. "Merick and Axel. It's a long story as to why they're getting married right out of high school, but I'm so happy for them. They were made for each other."

Dean snickers. "Is she pregnant?"

My brows knit. "No, why?"

"Because why else would two people right out of high school get married? At eighteen no one even knows what love is and are nowhere near responsible enough to get married."

Okay. Red flag number two. I have to bite my tongue to keep calm and not go off on him. *He's still your boss, Brin.* He knows nothing about Axel and Merick or what they've been through. He's judging their decision based on their age. I hate judgmental assholes. I take a long gulp of my water. And fuck him for thinking young people can't know what love is. Sammi and Maddox have loved each other since we were in second grade. Lawson and me, I absolutely knew I loved him from the first time I saw him standing in front of me at his house wearing a green dinosaur shirt and black shorts. That love didn't die after what he did, I just locked it away. "How old are you?" I'm hoping I can lighten the tension that's building.

"Thirty." Holy shit! He's older than I thought. Lawson's question drifts into my mind. *What does he want with an eighteen-year-old virgin?* "Does that surprise you?"

I nod as the waitress sits the oysters on the table. She hands a plate to Dean and one to me. Dean reaches for a couple and puts them on his plate while I keep my hands in my lap. "You look younger."

His gaze bobs between my empty plate and the oysters. "Aren't you going to eat any?"

My stomach rolls with nausea. *No, I am not letting one of those nasty slimy things slide down my throat.* It takes all my willpower not to gag. "No, thank you. I'm actually allergic to seafood." I let the lie roll off my tongue with ease.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” He winks. “More for me then.” Oh my God! Third red flag! How awful is this guy? Those good looks he has are quickly evaporating and he’s showing his true colors. I’m beginning to think the person he portrays at the café is a fraud and that the real Dean is a self-centered, egotistical, womanizing douchebag.

Dean eats his disgusting little creatures while I scrutinize him. Dean really is a handsome guy with his whiskey-colored eyes and sandy blond hair. But his hair isn’t brown, and his eyes aren’t a piercing blue. He has a strong jaw and thin lips. He doesn’t have facial hair covering his chiseled jaw and his lips aren’t full and kissable. That facial hair that tickled my inner thighs when Lawson’s face was between them flashes through my mind. Dean’s tall and broad, but he doesn’t have the endless muscles or the arms I can feel safe in when they’re wrapped around me. I don’t know Dean’s facial expressions or what he’s thinking when he makes certain ones. I realize I’m comparing and maybe I shouldn’t be because there will never be more with Lawson than what we are right now. But what we have going on will be more than Dean and I would ever be. As I continue watching him across the table my head and heart are on the same page. Dean is not Lawson and never could be. I’m not sure anyone could ever replace Lawson. Which is sad because that means I will never fully move on from him or us. I will die an old lonely lady with lots of cats or puppies to love me.

Our dinner is quiet and awkwardly so. It’s not a comfortable silence like I could have when I’m sitting at the apartment

eating a pizza with Lawson. Dean doesn't know me. If he did, he would know everything about this dinner is wrong. From this restaurant to every judgmental and idiotic word he has spewed from his phony mouth. Where is the guy that said he likes to have fun at work, who seemed nice and interesting?



As we're pulling into the apartment complex, Dean asks, "Who was that guy that came into the café?"

"Not someone I want to talk about." I open the car door and turn to look at him. "Thanks for dinner." Before he can respond, I close the door and swiftly walk to the apartment.

Stepping inside, I take a deep breath. Turning around, I have four sets of eyes staring at me. Lawson, Fisher, Kenzi, and someone I don't know.

Lawson's eyes narrow. "Thought you got off work at eight."

Averting my gaze to the coffee table, I spot the bottle of Jameson and shot glasses. "Oh, good. You have liquor." I point and wag my finger. "I'm gonna need that."

I wiggle my butt between Kenzi and Fisher on the couch. "Brin," Lawson grits through clenched teeth. His patience is waning thin with me.

I clap my hands together. "What are we playing or are we just doing shots?"

Fisher leans in close. "Girl, you're playing with fire. He's going to blow a gasket any minute if you keep ignoring him."

Or he's going to stroll his angry ass down to that café and burn that bitch to the ground."

"Shut it, Fisher," I whisper-yell.

"Kenzi, get up." His deep vibrating tone leaves no room for her to argue or to be asked twice.

My mouth drops open as I stare up at her and mouth *you trifling traitor*.

She mouths right back. *Sorry*.

She waltzes her trifling ass to the kitchen and carries a barstool back in here sitting it between Fisher and the guy I don't know. Is it a full moon tonight or what? Where is the girl that threatened him and wasn't scared of barbaric caveman Lawson?

Lawson pushes his hand under my legs and the other behind my back before tugging me next to him. "Where the fuck you been?"

"Hi, I'm Brin. Who are you?" I stare at the guy smirking.

His eyes ping pong between me and the caveman. "I'm Toby Rodgers. I'm on the team with Lawson."

"Nice to meet you, Toby." He's sexy. Tall and muscular like Lawson. Dark hair and eyes, a full beard and ink covering both arms. I internally sigh. He's still not Lawson.

"Fine." Lawson presses the pads of his fingers into my cheeks. He turns my face, making me look at him. "You wanna play? Let's play." His normal piercing blues are ice

cold. The way they bore into mine like he's seeing through me all the way to my soul causes a shiver to crawl up my spine. "How's truth or dare sound?"

"Sounds fun," Kenzi squeaks.

"I'm in." Toby shrugs.

Fisher rubs the back of his neck. "Let's do it."

Fuck my life! He's pissed off now, but when he finds out where I was, he's going to lose his shit.



Chapter Sixteen

LAWSON

Slamming a shot glass onto the coffee table in front of Brin, I sit beside her in the same spot I was in before I went to the kitchen. To say I'm pissed is an understatement. Fisher called it perfectly with his not-so-subtle whispers. If you pinch your finger and thumb together, that's how close I am to strolling my angry ass down there and burning that motherfucking café to the ground.

I glare daggers into the side of her head because she won't look at me. I skim my thumb along my bottom lip as I try to piece shit together in my head. She was supposed to get off work at eight, but she didn't walk in this apartment until ten. Where the fuck was she? I hope to God I'm fucking wrong, but I can take a guess who she was with. My other hand tightens into a fist until my knuckles turn white. I don't fucking like her boss and I want to know what the fuck he wants with her.

"Rules are," Kenzi makes eye contact with each one of us, "you can only pick dare two times before you have to pick truth." I can handle that. I know Brin, she's going to pick dare

as often as she can to avoid answering any questions I have. “If you pick dare you have to do a shot before you complete it.”

Toby fills each shot glass to the brim with the smooth whiskey. “Brin, truth or dare?” I blurt before anyone else can start the game.

Her telling gaze collides with mine. “Dare.” She picks up her shot glass and downs the poison, only grimacing a moment.

“I dare you to get on your knees and serenade me to...” I’m trying to think of a song until I hear it come through the speakers on our stereo. “This song.” Telling her to get on her knees and sing this song to me is an asshole move. I couldn’t give a fuck less about being an asshole at the moment. She has me out of my mind and filled with rage.

She lowers herself to the floor and begins singing the lyrics to “I Fall Apart” by Post Malone. This song hits me in the goddamn heart and so does the humiliation shining in her water-filled orbs.

I wipe away the lone tear trickling down her cheek as the song ends. She jerks her head away then sits back down and murmurs, “I never told you, you weren’t enough.”

I sigh heavily and run my hand down my face to try and control my emotions. “You’re not a whore either, but here we are.”

Her head snaps in my direction. “What is that supposed to mean? Here we are.” She tries mimicking my deep voice.

“I don’t know what it means.” Our gazes collide. “Why don’t you tell me? You’re the one with the answers and won’t tell me where the fuck you were!”

Kenzi’s ear-splitting whistle causes both of us to clamp our mouths shut. “Alright, enough you two. Fisher, truth or dare?”

“Fuck it, truth.”

“Hmm.” She taps her finger against her chin as if she’s contemplating a question. “Are you only attracted to men?”

Fisher gives her a devilish grin. “No.” No one has ever come out and asked him that as far as I know. I think in Cape Cove we all just assumed he was only attracted to men, but his sexual orientation never mattered to us. He was our friend regardless and we loved him unconditionally. He explains, “I’ll say I swing more on the men side, but I can appreciate a woman. I couldn’t settle for just a woman though like I could a man.”

She twirls her hair around her finger. “Does that mean you would be happy in a committed relationship with a man and a woman?”

He tsks his tongue. “Save it for your next turn.” Fisher scratches the back of his neck and looks at Brin, but I give him a silent warning not to go for her. “Toby, truth or dare?”

“Dare.” He downs his shot. His eyes keep drifting to Kenzi. They have all night. I think my friend has a thing for her. I

don't give a shit as long as he stays the fuck away from Brin and heeds my warning that she's off-limits.

Fisher has that devilish glint in his eye. "I dare you to call the last person you talked to and give them your best dirty talk."

Toby throws his head back laughing. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and taps his last call. My phone starts ringing. You've got to be fucking kidding me! Groaning, I say, "Hello?"

Toby sucks in a breath and lowers his tone. "Hey, Daddy." He breathes heavily into the phone like he's close to getting off. Brin's hand flies to her mouth, muffling her loud cackling. Fisher and Kenzi double over laughing. He continues, "I'll rip that black shirt from your body and take those nipple piercings into my mouth until you beg me to stop. You'll beg me won't you, Daddy? Or I'll make you my good little fuckboy. I'll shove my cock down your throat until—"

I end the call before he can finish. The three asshole roommates of mine are howling so hard tears leak from their eyes.

"Oh my God!" Kenzi tries to catch her breath.

"That was the best!" Fisher snorts.

"Lawson, truth or dare?" Brin pants between laughs.

I have nothing to hide. "Truth."

"Is it true that sophomore year you, Axel, and Maddox broke into the school, smoked a joint in Mr. Stanley's office,

and read personnel files?”

“Yes. Yes. No. Axel and Maddox read files to get dirt on people. I broke in and smoked with them, but I didn’t give a shit what was in anyone’s file. I had no reason to fuck with people like they did.” I fire back, “Brin, truth or dare?”

“Dare.” She fills her shot glass and lets the liquid flow down her throat.

“I dare you to shoot three more shots back-to-back.”

I watch as she takes each one. Her cheeks tinge pink, the telltale sign Brin’s starting to feel Jameson’s effects. It happens every time she drinks.

“Lawson, truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Have you ever lied to me?”

“No,” I simply state. That was an easy one. I have never once lied to her. She’s not trying to dig too deep because she knows I’ll dig deeper.

“Truth or dare?” Since our back and forth started, Kenzi, Toby, and Fisher are playing amongst themselves. I imagine it’s their way of letting us work this shit out between us. “You have to pick truth,” I remind her.

“Truth.”

“Did you burn the letters?” I’ll start with an easy one. When she told me she burned them I didn’t believe her. I want the confirmation that I was right and that she lied to me about it.

She chews her lip nervously, knowing she's caught. "No, I didn't burn them. Truth or dare, Lawson?"

"Dare."

"I dare you to tell me the meaning behind your tattoos."

Standing up, I pull my shirt over my head. I turn to my side that says sinner. "Sinner represents me. I've done some fucked up shit." Spinning, I show her the word saint. "Saint represents you." My eyes meet hers. "You were the best part of me." She quietly gasps and covers her mouth with the tips of her fingers. "These stars represent us." I stare down at her, watching another tear trickle down her cheek. "From day one we were written in the stars, Brin, no matter what has happened throughout our lives we're always brought back to each other. Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

I'm getting this shit over with because it's taking too goddamn long for me to find out. "I dare you to tell me where you were after eight."

Guilt etches her features. "I went to eat." Went to eat involves riding in a car. She could have been with someone else, but I highly fucking doubt it.

"Truth or dare?"

My nostrils flare as I look down at her. My fists clench at my sides. "Cut the shit, Brin. Game over. Who did you go eat with?"

Her eyes cast downward as she twists the hem of her shirt. “Dean.” Her voice is so quiet I barely heard her, but it fillets me the fuck open.

“Where did he take you?”

“Waterfront.”

“What the fuck is Waterfront?” My head snaps in the direction of the other three who are sitting quietly watching our exchange. “Do any of you know what the fuck Waterfront is?”

Toby grimaces. “It’s a five-star restaurant here in Harbor by the pier.”

“A five-star restaurant.” I nod with pursed lips as I let it soak in. Turning back to Brin, I roar, “A five-star motherfucking restaurant? You went on a motherfucking date with him?” I feel my chest caving in. I can’t fucking breathe. I need to get away from her. My feet pound through the apartment, I slam my door closed and turn my stereo on. I don’t want to hear the thoughts running through my head.

The door opens, not even a whole song later, and Brin steps inside. She walks to the stereo and turns it down. “I’m sorry.”

I hop off the bed and stalk closer, cornering her. “I don’t want your I’m sorrys.” I point toward the door. “Get. Out.”

She stands tall and not ready to back down. “No.”

“You lied to me. You told me you weren’t fucking around with him. Just like you told me you burned those letters. You came home looking guilty as fuck and have the gall to ignore

me. I'm not doing this shit with you, Brin, so you can go fuck yourself."

Backing away, I sit on the edge of my bed, fisting the comforter on either side of me with my head hung in defeat. I can't look at her. She's fucking killing me. "If this is your payback, you win. I give up." Every part of me dies with those words, but I can't keep doing this back-and-forth bullshit with her. I can't keep fighting for us when she's out on dates with other guys. Especially after whatever has been evolving between us. I know we made that asinine deal, but the idiot in me thought I could make her want more.

"I left the box of letters in California. There was one night, about a week before we left, I was sitting in the backyard with Nanna's fire pit going. I had the letters beside me, and I was looking up at the stars. I wanted to come to college to start over. I wanted to leave everything of us behind me, so I held a letter in my hand and was getting ready to throw it in the fire, but she stopped me."

My hurt gaze locks with hers. "Why lie about it, though? We never lied to each other. And now it seems like that's all you do."

"That's just it. What we were isn't what we are now. Those letters are from a part of me that I can't give you. You're already stealing little pieces of me that I'm not ready to hand over." She drops to her knees in front of me, bringing us eye level. "I'm sorry I lied about the letters, but I didn't lie to you about Dean. I don't want him, Lawson."

I hiss, “Don’t say his fucking name.”

“Okay.” She releases a deep breath of air. “When I first filled out the application, I thought he was good looking. Yes, there was an energy around us when we worked together. Nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will. Tonight was not a date, at least it wasn’t for me. I was messing up at work and he told me to clock out. It was close to eight anyway, but he told me to come outside. I thought he was going to fire me, but instead he said he could hear my stomach growling all night. I didn’t eat my lunch, remember?”

“Yes, I remember.” He’s trying to play the nice guy, but there’s something underneath that façade. I feel it in the pit of my stomach.

“He said he would take me to get some food. I was starving, Lawson. I figured he was going to take me to a drive-thru somewhere. Instead, he took me to that fancy ass restaurant. He will never get the chance to get me in his car again, I swear.”

I search her features for any sign she’s not telling the truth. But there is none. “How am I supposed to believe you?”

“Because from now on, no matter if I work day or night, I want you there to pick me up. If you can’t be there, I’ll have Kenzi or Fisher be there.”

My gut twists with unease. “Did he do something to you? Did he hurt you? Touch you?”

“No.” She shakes her head adamantly. “He didn’t do anything. He didn’t hurt me, he only grabbed my hand, and I pulled mine away. I didn’t feel right with the whole situation, and I was uncomfortable. He’s just an asshole.” She grins. “If it makes you feel better, I thought about you the entire time and I compared him to you. He didn’t measure up to you, not by a long shot.”

My knuckles brush across her cheek, she leans into my touch. “I’m an asshole too and I’m going to break his goddamn hand for touching you. I’m going to teach that motherfucker a lesson about touching what’s not his.”

She stares at me with a mischievous grin. “You’re an asshole in a sexy way. He’s just an asshole. You can’t go around breaking hands, Lawson. I won’t let you take a chance of getting in trouble or hurting your own hands in the process. Besides, he’s still my boss and I need this job.” She doesn’t need that job, but I’m not going to fight with her about it again. I also know she’s right. If I get in trouble or hurt, I ruin my chances of playing football.

I’m done talking about him, so I focus on her being here with me now. I wiggle my brows. “You think I’m sexy?”

Brin wedges herself between my legs. Hands cradling my jaw, her eyes soften. “I think you’re a lot of things, Law.” My heart hammers in my chest at her using the nickname that was only ever hers to use.

“I want you to be mine again. I want us again.”

Her hands and head drop. “I want to keep doing what we’re doing until I move back into the dorm. This is fun, and that’s all I can handle right now.”

The palms of my hands skate up her arms until they’re on either side of her neck. My thumbs caress in a gentle line up to her ear and back down. “You’re still going to put a time limit on us? You know this will never end between us.”

“I’m not going to think of it as a time limit. I’m going to think of it as only right now.” She stands. “And right now, I want to show you how sorry I am.” She steps over to the stereo and turns the music back up as Morgan Wallen sings “Last Night”.

Brin lifts her shirt, pulling it over her head, and tosses it across the room. Reaching behind her, she unclasps her bra and slides the straps down her shoulders. Teasingly, she dangles the white lace from her finger until she lets it fall to the floor.

My heated gaze is glued to her while I scoot back and get comfortable. She shimmies her jeans and panties down her legs, then steps out of them. Seeing Brin completely bare in front of me is a sight I couldn’t even conjure up in my wildest fantasies. It would never do her justice. She’s so fucking beautiful. Her long blonde hair cascades around her shoulders in waves from being in a messy bun. Her gorgeous perky tits rise and fall with labored breaths that increase the longer I peruse her body. Nipples hardening into tight little buds I want

to suck into my mouth. Her thin waist leads to luscious hips I want to grip while she rides my cock.

She sashays to the edge of the bed and climbs onto my lap. Tucking an arm behind my head, I tell her, “You’re playing with fire, Brin. You’re seeking forgiveness and using your hot little body against me. I’m still pissed at you.”

“And I still dislike you. He’ll never have this. He’ll never have any part of me.”

I scoot up into a sitting position. I tangle my fingers through her hair. “Why?”

“Because he’s not you.” Pulling her closer, our lips crash together.

Her lips skate across my jaw. Stopping at my ear, she whispers, “Make me burn, Law.” She bites and sucks my flesh; leaving marks no doubt. I don’t give a fuck; let everyone see the claim she has over me. My eyes roll into the back of my head as I’m engulfed in her fruity scent, I drown in the feel of her mouth, my senses heighten from the feel of her soft heated flesh against my hard body.

Her head dips to my nipple, tongue flicking against the barbell. “Shit!” I moan while fisting my comforter. She travels to the other and plays with that piercing as well. She roams lower and lower kissing each ab and leaving a wet reminder of where her tongue touched me. She peppers kisses along the waistline of my basketball shorts before hooking her fingers in and tugging them down my legs along with my boxers.

She's driving me fucking crazy. I growl, "Let me feel how wet you are." She crawls up my body, thighs spread as I run my finger along her wetness. "Your cunt's sopping for me, Pretty Girl." I don't know what she's wanting to do here, so I'm going to let her lead and I'll follow wherever she takes me.

Brin eases herself down, positioning her pussy along my aching cock. The first grind of her hips causes us both to hiss in pleasure. She leans close, mouth to my ear. "I just want to feel you." No sex, just bumping uglies. Got it. I can handle that.

My fingers dig into the flesh of her ass cheeks. I quicken her motions. "Does my cock feel good, Pretty Girl?"

"Yes," she breathes heavily.

My eyes close at the feel of her hard little clit rubbing over each protruding vein. "Fuck!"

"Lawson!" she mewls. My arms flex as I increase our tempo. Leaning up, I suck her nipple into my mouth. I twirl my tongue and gently bite her hardened peak, moving to the other, I show it the same attention.

"Imagine how good it would feel if I was inside you. Hitting that spot over and over that will have you creaming all over my fucking cock." Goddamn, she feels so fucking good! Our sweaty bodies glide against each other with ease. My teeth clench as I release a feral sound.

The friction between us builds as her nails cut into the skin of my shoulders. “I’m going to come,” she cries out.

“Get lost with me.” My spine prickles and balls tighten.

“Lawson!” Brin’s head falls back, and a guttural cry rips out of her.

Pulling her body against mine, I press my forehead into the curve of her neck. “Brin!” I grunt her name as my orgasm builds higher and higher. “Fuck!” My voice trembles. This is the closest I’ve come to having sex in a long fucking time and I swear to God this is a thousand times better.

Her nails continue to cut into the skin on my shoulders while I bruise her hips with my rough grip, our moans silence the music. Brin soaks my cock with the force of her release at the same moment hot spurts of cum hit my stomach. I slow our movements until our bodies stop shaking and our breaths are controlled.

“I’m not done with you yet. Up on your knees and hold onto the headboard.” She lazily gets herself where I want her. I slide down until my face is underneath her. “Spread your thighs wider and bring that ass down here.”

She tries to plead, “Lawson, I can’t. It’s too sensitive.” Her hips sway side to side as if she’s trying to ease the overwhelming sensation.

I demand, “You can, and you will. I’m going to tongue fuck you so good I’ll be drowning in your cum. The orgasm you just had is nothing compared to how I’m about to make you

feel. Now, ride my face like the good fucking girl you are and let me light you on fucking fire.”

I flick my tongue against her sweet sensitive little spot. “Ahh!” she cries and jerks. I swiftly wrap my arms around her thighs keeping her in place. I lap her swollen lips tasting her sweet essence.

My tongue strums her clit, I release one of her legs only to push two fingers into her drenched cunt. The moment that building tension takes over, her panted breaths increase, and she rolls her hips against my face. “That’s it, such a good fucking girl. My pretty girl’s going to come again.” I pump my fingers in and out, touching that spot inside of her that’s going to make her lose all sense. Her legs shake uncontrollably. “Oh, God, Lawson. Don’t stop!” *Never.*

I suck her clit into my mouth and pull my fingers out. I want her to go fucking crazy when she comes. I want her completely and utterly undone. I move my finger further back, drawing slow circles around her asshole. She tenses for a moment. “Relax and trust me,” I mumble against her pussy. I know she trusts me with her body, that’s why I’m not surprised when she does exactly what I tell her.

Assaulting her clit until she forgets where my finger is, I push it just past the rim. “Oh, my fucking God!” Brin screams. I have no doubt everyone in this apartment heard her.

I find a steady rhythm of slow precise movements with my finger and quick measured strokes of my tongue. She spreads

her thighs wider practically sitting completely on my face which pushes my finger deeper. “Yes! Oh, fuck yes!”

Her orgasm is coming fast and strong. Hurriedly, I release her other thigh and push two fingers back inside her pussy, finding her G-spot once again. “Take it, Pretty Girl, take my fucking fingers.” She’s wildly bucking her hips seeking the orgasm that’s going to shatter her. “Soak my face like a good fucking girl,” I coax.

“Oh God!” she screams rapidly. “Oh fuck!” Her head hangs. “I’m coming!” *I know, Baby, I know.* She hits her crescendo and I drink her in. Every. Fucking. Drop.

Pulling my fingers out she falls onto the bed. “I can’t move.”

“Don’t move. Just look at me.” Her eyes find mine. I fist my cock, pumping quick and fast. “You’re so fucking sexy when you come.”

“I like watching you.” Her eyes drift down. “I like your dirty mouth. I love when you call me pretty girl and your good girl.” She’s using her words to draw my orgasm closer and I fucking love it.

My lips quirk. “You like that?” My hand moves in rapid strokes.

“I do.” She glides her wet tongue along her bottom lip. “I still remember how you felt in my mouth. How big you were. How I gagged because of your size. How you tasted. I’ve

thought about how that piercing would feel in the back of my throat or inside me.”

“Fuck, Brin!” I groan as my hot seed coats my stomach again. “Jesus, you’re going to be the death of me.” Her shoulders shake with laughter.

Kissing her forehead, I get off the bed, and find my boxers. Grabbing two washcloths out of my closet, I take them to the bathroom. After washing my hands, I drench the washcloths with warm water. I use one to wipe my stomach clean.

As I’m heading back to my room something stops me. As I listen, my eyes widen. *How far did their game of truth or dare go?* Shaking my head, I take the other washcloth to Brin. I close my bedroom door with a sheepish smirk. “I think Fisher is experiencing what they call a wild college night.”

Brin’s brows shoot up her forehead. “What?”

I nod while chuckling. “They’re having sex in his room.”

“Who?” she squeals. “Him and Kenzi?”

I nod again, slowly. “And Toby.”

“Oh my God!” Brin covers her mouth and giggles. “Is it bad that I want to fist pump for them? Do you think he talks dirty like he did to you?”

My lips quirk. “You’re so fucking cute, but don’t ever wonder about how another guy dirty talks.” I press my lips to hers softly.

She laughs and murmurs, “I can’t help it. That was hot. Are you still pissed at me?”

I tilt my head side to side. “Yes and no. Do you still dislike me?”

She gives me a blinding smile. “After those orgasms and whatever you did to my body...I think I might be leaning toward liking you a little. I should go back to my room.”

I shake my head and wrap my arms around her waist. “No. You should stay in my bed.”

“Lawson.”

I challenge, “Brin.”

“I can’t keep staying in here.”

“If you stay tonight, I’ll forgive you. Besides if you’re keeping me on a time limit, I’m making every second count.”

She huffs. “That’s not fair.”

I cock my brow with a sly smirk. “What’s it going to be, Brin? Have me stay pissed or you want my forgiveness?”

Her beautiful green eyes narrow to slits. “You’re an extortionist.” She lays her head on my chest and wraps her leg around mine.

And I have my answer with a shit-eating grin plastered on my face. I hold her until her eyes are closed and she’s quietly snoring. I press my lips to the crown of her head. “Night, Brin. I love you.” The last thing I hear before sleep takes me is Jamie Lawson’s lyrics to “Don’t Let Me Let You Go”.



Chapter Seventeen

BRINLEY

“**L**awson,” I whimper quietly, still in my sleepy state. I’m stuck between wondering if this is a dream or if Lawson really is between my parted legs. If it’s a dream I don’t want to wake up, but his facial hair tickling my inner thighs and the sweeping motions of his talented tongue feel very real. My eyes flutter open, I take a chance to look and yes it is happening. God, he’s so good at eating me, like I’m his favorite meal and he’s been starved for days.

His hooded eyes collide with mine. “Good morning, Pretty Girl.”

“Good morning.” Reaching out, I weave my fingers through his short brown hair and clamp onto the back of his head. “Don’t stop, please.”

“Fuck, do you know how sexy it is to hear you beg?” He drives two fingers inside me. My back arches into his thrusting movements. His tongue vibrates against my clit.

“Right there.” My hand on his head pulls him in deeper, my thighs spread wider. “More!”

His fingers piston in and out fervently fucking me. His tongue devours me dangerously. “Yes! Yes! Oh, God, yes!” That bomb inside me is growing closer to detonating.

“Eyes on me and beg to come like my good girl knows she needs to.”

Opening my eyes, they peer into his. “Please, Law, please let me come. You’re the only one who can give me this. Please.” Tears prick my throat. The sensations he’s drawing from my body are overwhelming and almost too much to take.

His gaze never wavers from mine as he hypnotizes me. I feel him everywhere and even though I’m watching him devour me like I’m the best meal he’s ever had, I’m seeing through to the very depths of his soul and he’s doing the same to me. The air around us thickens, blanketing us in. When we’re connected on this level it’s just us, everyone and everything else evaporates.

My legs tremble, I see stars dancing in my vision. One more flick of his tongue and pump of his fingers and I come undone. My pussy pulsates as my climax bursts through my entire being.

Lawson gently eases his fingers out and crawls up my body. He paints my lips with his coated fingers and sweeps his tongue across the seam, seeking entrance into my mouth. Letting him have it, I taste myself on his exploring tongue.

“A girl could get used to waking up like this.”

He chuckles against my mouth. "I'll be more than happy to oblige as long as you're in my bed every night. I thought I would give you a little present before I have to leave."

"What time do you have to be on the bus?" His team has an away game, he's going to be gone for the next three days. I don't know why it feels like lead is sitting heavily in my belly. *Yes, you do, Brin. You're falling for him again and you're going to miss him.* No, there were to be no feelings involved in this, just fun, and I'm sticking to that. My heart can stay far far away.

Lawson searches my features, his fingers tuck strands of hair behind my ear. "We leave in a couple of hours."

"What time is it?" I glance at the alarm clock on his nightstand. *Shit!* "I have to get ready for work."

He groans but rolls off me. "I want just one day where we can stay in bed all day." *No!* I am not going to think about that because I can't keep sleeping in his bed.

"I need to get ready." I jump out of his bed in search of my clothes. That pesky organ in my chest thunders. I didn't want this. I don't want this. *Yes, you do.*

After getting my clothes on, I grab one of Lawson's towels and rush out of his room. I felt his gaze assessing me while I ran around his room like a crazy person. Maybe three days apart from him is just what I need to put whatever this is between us back into perspective.

I take a quick shower, wrap the towel around my body, and go into my room. Opening the door on the closet me and Kenzi share, my brows pull down in confusion. *What the hell?* All my work shirts are gone, as a matter-of-fact, every shirt I own is gone. All of Kenzi's clothes are hanging on her side. My jeans are hanging up, where did my shirts go? They've been replaced with all white t-shirts. Moving each hanger, my mouth drops open. Grabbing all of them, I storm out of my room and back into his. "What the hell is this?"

His tongue presses into his cheek before he lets out a deep rumbling laugh. "Your new wardrobe."

Rolling my eyes, I huff in annoyance. "Lawson! I have to get ready for work. I don't have time for pranks. Give me my clothes!"

He smirks knowingly. "Guess you'll have to wear one of those."

My irritated stare widens. "They all have your face on them!" I move my finger around in a circle on the first shirt. "Your giant face with black teeth!" I hold the first hanger out. "**The Man, The Myth, The Legend.**" The next one. "**Lawson Beck's The Man.**" I drop them onto his bed as I read. "**Lawson Beck Is King Of My Throne.**"

He points. "That one's my personal favorite. **Lawson Beck Owned.**"

I stomp my foot like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum. "Give me my clothes!"

“No can do, Brinny Baby.”

“Ugh! You’re such an asshole!” I glare in challenge. “See if I ever sleep in your bed again!”

He chuckles, not believing me for a second. “You can sleep wherever you want in this apartment, but I’ll goddamn guarantee you’re gonna wake up in this bed with my head buried in that pretty little cunt of yours.”

He drives me absolutely crazy! And I hate the fact that he’s right. Him and his stupid magical tongue. Taking one of the shirts off the hanger, I tug it over my head, and leave his room slamming the door on my way out. I’m stuck wearing this god-awful shirt to work. Staring down at it, I shake my head with a smile. This one says **Isn’t He Cute?** As far as pranks go it’s a pretty good one and he outdid himself this time. I can’t stay mad when I’m the reason he had those black teeth to begin with and I started this war between us.

Sitting my phone on the counter, “Dirty Looks” by Lainey Wilson plays while I start making scrambled eggs and bacon for everyone. I hold the spatula up to my mouth and sway my hips to the rhythm of the song. Strong arms wrap around me from behind, his soft lips pepper kisses along the side of my neck. Goosebumps pebble my flesh, and a shiver races up my spine. “You still pissed at me?”

Turning the stove off and setting my fake microphone down, I spin in his embrace. “I guess I can’t be pissed when you had to go to practice with those black teeth.” I grin, snaking my arms around his neck. Lawson lifts me off the

floor, then shifting us, he sits me onto the counter, and his lips find mine. His kiss is possessive and claiming.

“I see you two made up.” I didn’t even hear Fisher enter the kitchen.

Breaking our lips apart, Lawson’s forehead presses against mine. “I’m going to go get ready. We can go to the bus and then you take my car.”

“I can’t take your car, Lawson.”

His gaze bores into mine. “It’s not up for discussion. I’m gone for three days, Brin, I’m not going to worry about someone being there to pick you up from work.”

I can’t argue with that. “Okay.” I don’t want to have to depend on Fisher or Kenzi to be there when I’m done working. I watch Lawson disappear into the hallway. My attention drags to Fisher. “Shut up.” I hop off the counter and grab a plate for my breakfast.

His shoulders shake and he’s not hiding his smirk behind the coffee mug he’s holding to his lips. “I didn’t say anything. Nice shirt.”

“You didn’t have to.” Sitting onto a stool, I add, “He got me on this one.”

He leans his forearms on the counter. “I’ve given him a lot of shit, Brin, and I’ve always been on your side.”

I slowly chew a bite of food that’s now cooled off. “Yeah.”

“He’s doing a lot to show you how he feels. I don’t know what’s going on between you two now, but don’t hurt him, Brin.”

“No one’s getting hurt, Fisher. We’re having fun, that’s all.”

Fisher snorts. “I love you, girl, but that’s the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard. If you’re jumping into this mess you two have created, you’re going to kill him when you walk away.”

Kenzi yells from our bedroom. “B?”

Leaving Fisher in the kitchen, I go see what she needs. Opening the bedroom door, she’s sitting on the bed looking at her phone with wild hair. “Have you looked at your emails?”

“No, why?”

Her eyes snap to mine. “The dorm is closed for the rest of the school year. They’re reimbursing housing payments.”

“What?” I sit beside her and read over the email. “What do we do?”

Kenzi’s brow cocks and head tilts slightly like I should already know. “We go out there and ask if we can stay longer. I’ll give them the payment I’m sent.”

“Let’s go.” My shoulders slump. That puts me here way longer than I expected.

“Fisher, Lawson?” I call out. Walking back into the kitchen, they’re both sitting at the island eating.

“What?” they say in sync, eyes jumping between us.

“An email was sent out and apparently the dorm will be closed for the rest of the school year. Are you guys—“

Lawson cuts me off. “Stay as long as you want. In fact, why not just say you fucking live here instead?”

Kenzi bounces on her feet. “You guys really don’t care? I’ll give you my payment they send.”

Fisher and Lawson glance at each other. “Keep it.” When the hell did they start living on this same wavelength shit?

“Come on, Brin. We gotta go.” Lawson stands up. Walking past me to put his dishes in the sink, he slaps my ass. “As far as I’m concerned you can go ahead and move your shit into my room. Let Kenzi have the spare room to herself.” I gawk at him like he’s lost it. I am not moving my stuff into his room. This is getting out of control. Three days away is exactly what I need. *Keep lying to yourself.*

Lawson walks to the front door. “Just fun, huh?” Fisher rinses the dishes in the sink and opens the dishwasher to load it.

“Shew, B, you got your hands full with that one.” Kenzi shakes her head while silently laughing.

Hands full is right. What do I do? What I thought would be a short time is turning into a lot longer than expected. How long can I keep denying what I know is happening and keep saying it’s just fun? Lawson is blatantly making it known how he feels and what he wants. This isn’t just fun to him like our deal was supposed to be. I’m falling for him, I know I am, I’m

just too scared to actually admit it. If I keep it to myself then I can keep pretending. But how am I going to up and leave next year? I'm in way over my head with no way out except to destroy us both.

Standing at the trunk of his car, Lawson drops the keys into my palm. "Have a good night at work."

"Have a safe trip."

He pushes his duffel bag up his shoulder. "Fuck, I hate this. C'mere." Lawson throws his arm around my neck and pulls me into his chest. "I'm going to miss you, Brin." His lips press against the crown of my head.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I peer up at him. "I'm going to miss you too."

"I'll text you tonight." His lips descend on mine. He kisses me like he's going to be gone for a year and not three days. Leaving me breathless, Lawson cradles my cheeks, and gently kisses my forehead. "I'll see you soon."

"Have a good game," I yell at his retreating back.

Sliding behind the wheel, I adjust the driver's seat and rearview mirror. I giggle with excitement as I rev the engine. He would kill me, but as long as he's letting me drive his black-on-black 2022 Dodge Charger I'm going to have fun in it. The tires squeal as I leave smoke in my wake while I drive through the campus parking lot closer to the café.

I walk into the back of the café to hang my purse and coat. "Brinley, can you come in here a second?" Dean calls from

inside his office.

“Hi. What did you need?” Just as he’s about to say something his eyes zone in on my shirt.

“What are you wearing? Why are you not in uniform?”

“It was a stupid prank...”

Dean cuts me off. “I don’t care what it was. This is your job not somewhere you can come dressed however you want.”

“I’m sorry.”

He reaches into a box and tosses a shirt at me. “I’ll deduct the cost from your check. Don’t let it happen again or you’ll be written up. Do you understand?”

I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying something. He wants to act like this because of what? Jealousy? Because I’m wearing a shirt that has Lawson’s face on it. “I understand.”

After changing my shirt in the bathroom, I clock in on the register and begin my shift.

Throughout the day I didn’t even have a chance to look at my phone. Thank God, Dean left halfway through the shift because he stayed in his grumpy ass mood and was making everyone miserable. We were all able to relax once he was gone and didn’t have to feel like we would get yelled at every second.

It’s already dark outside when I start the ignition on Lawson’s car and check my messages. I hate when I’m scheduled for long shifts. It makes me feel like I lost out on a

whole day since I start in the mornings. Especially with it being a Sunday. I have one missed text from Lawson.

L: Your clothes are in the trunk of my car.

At the end there's a smiling emoji with its tongue sticking out.

Ass! I need to figure out my next prank to top his. I'll text him once I get home.

Home? That's the first time I've called the apartment that. I'm not going to dwell on the fact that my heart skipped a beat when I called it that. I've compartmentalized me and Lawson. I keep telling myself I'm just staying here for the time being, we're just having fun, we can try and build a new friendship while adding in the bonus benefits, we can go back to the way things were before I had to stay in his apartment. As much as I kept that in my head, my heart has been screaming at me that it's all bullshit. My heart has obliterated every notion I thought was a possible ending for me and Lawson. My heart knows that we're living together and will continue to do so because I'm not going to be able to walk away from him. My heart knows it belongs to Lawson and it has since we were six. Even when I hated him, he still owned it because he never gave it back.

"How was work, B?" Kenzi asks while she and Fisher shoot at people on whatever game they're playing on the gaming system.

I sit on the end of the couch. "Exhausting. Dean was pissed off and was less than impressed with my shirt, so he gave me

another one and is deducting money out of my check for it.”

Fisher gasps. “You killed me! We’re on the same fucking team!”

Kenzi sits the controller on the coffee table. “Sorry, Fish, we need to talk to our bestie. So, game over.”

“Can he not take a joke?” Fisher leans back on the couch, eyes meeting mine.

“I don’t know. I like my job, but I’m seeing this whole other side to him and it’s starting to make work really uncomfortable.”

“He feels threatened.”

“What do you mean?” I ask Kenzi.

“He wants you and he knows there’s another guy even though he doesn’t know specifics about you and Lawson. He’s nice to you, takes you to dinner and all that, but the moment he feels like he’s losing he flips the script. He’s saying my dick’s bigger and thinks being a dominant asshole is going to make you flock to him. Gives serious red flags and he doesn’t think you’re smart enough to realize what a manipulative piece of shit he is.” She shakes her head. “Damn those good looks got wasted. You need to be careful, B.”

Fisher’s brows are furrowed as he runs his fingers through his black and blond hair. “I’m with Kenz on this one. Maybe you should find another job.”

I contemplate what they’re saying. It was one thing when I thought Lawson was being a jealous jerk not wanting me to

work there, but it has crossed my mind a few times since that dinner last night. Work was really uncomfortable with Dean there today and I don't want to feel like that or like I'm having to walk on eggshells. Now, my friends are worried and don't think I should be working there either. "I'll finish my shifts until break and then when we get back, I'll tell Dean I quit and find a new job. I'm going to text Lawson."

Kenzi wiggles her brows. "A little sexy sexy before bed."

Laughing, I stand up and walk toward my room, but decide to go to his instead. I lie down and send him a message.

M: You're an ass you know that? You could have just given my clothes back.

L: What would have been the fun in that? How was work?

M: It was good. Where are you?

I'm not going to tell him it was horrible because that'll just make him angry and worry the whole time he's gone. He needs to focus in case he gets a chance to play.

L: We have an hour or so left before we make it to Cleveland. Where are you?

M: Home.

L: Home? I like the sound of that. Where you sleeping while I'm gone?

M: In the bed I'm in right now.

L: Whose bed, Pretty Girl?

My belly swarms with butterflies. I love him calling me that.

M: Yours.

L: Good Girl. I want my sheets smelling like you when I get home.

And now I'm a swooning puddle of turned on and happiness.

M: You can't say things like that when you're hundreds of miles away.

L: Why?

That one word, I can practically hear the octaves drop in his tone in that sexy husky way that makes my center ache for him.

M: You know why.

L: Tell me.

M: It makes me need something that you can't give me because you're not here.

L: How wet are your panties?

M: Soaked.

L: Fuck, Brin! Don't you dare touch yourself until I tell you to. I'm going to call you when I get checked in.

M: What will you do if I don't wait?

L: You want to be punished, Pretty Girl?

Oh my fucking God this is so hot! Do I want to be punished? The thought of Lawson bending me over and spanking me makes my body ignite with a craving I never knew I would want.

M: Yes.

L: I'm done! I'm so fucking hard right now. I need to calm down before I won't be able to get off this bus. I'll call you soon.

I throw my phone on the bed and decide I'll go grab my sexiest matching bra and panties while I wait for his call.

A couple of hours later my phone rings. He didn't just call, Lawson FaceTimed me. "Hey." I feel like a young girl with her first crush. That giddy excited feeling you get when you see the boy and you can't contain the smile that spreads across your lips.

"Hey, Pretty Girl." Lawson's smile is as big as mine showing his perfectly straight white teeth.

"Are you alone?"

Lawson situates himself on the bed, leaning against the headboard. "Yeah, I'm rooming with Toby, but I told him to give me some time to call you. He went to meet with some of the team downstairs at the restaurant."

"You could have joined them and called me later."

He shakes his head. "Not a chance. You come before anything else, Brin. I can eat later, I needed to see your face and hear your voice." I feel the same way. I'm still coming to

terms with my feelings, so I'm not ready to say them out loud yet.

"You know how to make a girl feel special." I try to keep our conversation light. "What are you wearing?"

Lawson chuckles. "Isn't that supposed to be my line? I'm wearing the same clothes I had on this morning." He flips the camera so I can see his loose-fitting denim jeans and white t-shirt. "What about you?" I wait until I see his face again before slowly moving the camera down my body showing him my red lace bra and matching thong panties.

"Goddamn," he hisses. Bringing the phone back up to my face I notice the change in his eyes. They've darkened to a deep blue filled with lust and hunger. "You got ready for me?"

"Yes."

"You're beautiful, Brin. Fucking perfect." Lawson sits the phone down for a second and when he lifts it up his shirt is gone. Those muscles, tattoos, and piercings do something to me. I swear he makes me a drooling mess every time I see his body.

I can't lie. He is one beautiful man. "So are you, Law." We're both flawed and have our faults. What happened in the past happened and there's no changing that, but if I want this, want him, and want to explore what we could be then I have to let it go. Can I release my fears and jump headfirst into this with the person I have loved my entire life?

"Did you touch yourself?"

I shake my head. “No.”

“That’s a shame. I was kind of hoping you would, so I could punish you when I got back.”

I mischievously smirk. “I could always give you another reason to punish me.”

He chuckles. “I bet you could. How would I punish you, Pretty Girl?”

“Spank me.” That aching need returns pounding between my thighs.

Lawson sucks in air between his gritted teeth. “I’ll lay you across my lap and turn the flesh of your plump ass to a beautiful pink.” I moan quietly. “Do you feel it?”

I whisper, “Do I feel what?”

“Your pussy throbbing for me.”

“Yes.”

“Touch yourself, Pretty Girl, tell me how wet you are.”

Doing as he instructs, I slide a finger through my wetness. “I’m wet. So wet. I wish you were here. It’s not the same.”

“I know. I wish I was there too. I wish I could feel you and taste you.”

“I need you, Law.”

“Rub your clit for me. Just like I would do.” At the first touch my back arches and my eyes slam closed. “Atta girl. Eyes on me.”

They flutter open, locking with his. “I want you to do this with me.”

“I already am.” His words are breathy and eyes heavy.

“I want to see you.” He turns the camera. His hand is fisting his cock jerking up and down in a slow steady motion. “That’s so hot.” Just like it was the night I watched him in the shower.

He keeps the camera where I can watch. “Take your panties off and let me see you.” I quickly slide the lace material down and part my thighs. Picking my phone up, I angle the camera so he can see. “Fuck!” Lawson groans. “Push two fingers inside then play with that clit, Pretty Girl.”

“Lawson!” I mewl his name in desperation. I need to come so badly.

“That’s my good girl. Faster.” I watch his hand furiously stroking his cock and match his rhythm. I see the bulging veins and the angry red crown leaking beads of precum. He needs this as much as I do.

“I want to taste you again. I want to put you in my mouth and give you as much pleasure as you do me. Do you want that, Law? Do you want me to suck you until you’re coming down my throat?”

“Fuck yes! I want you to gag and cry. I want those beautiful tears to taste. I’ll make you come so fucking hard you’ll black out.”

“Lawson!” I cry out as my orgasm builds.

“Wider, Pretty Girl, spread those thighs wider for me!” The heels of my feet touch while my knees hit his sheets. “That’s it, it feels so much better doesn’t it?”

“Yes! God, yes!”

“You’re close aren’t you? Show me how much you love being my good girl.”

“Yes, are you?”

“I’m right there with you. Watching you is so fucking sexy.”

“Yes!”

I explode while screaming his name over and over. “Good fucking girl,” he praises and I love it. I love him. “Brin?” I move my camera to my face. “Clean your fingers.” Sticking them into my mouth, I suck them clean. “Fuck!” he growls as I watch jets of white hit his stomach.

“I like watching you.”

Our eyes meet when he lifts his camera. “I like watching you too, but I love being the one who makes you come undone.”

“Will you call me tomorrow?”

“Do you want me to?” I nod. “Then I will.”

I wish he was here right now so I could kiss those lips smiling at me and trace my finger over his dimples. “I don’t want to get off the phone.”

“Then we’ll stay on the phone until you fall asleep.”

As much as I would love that I don't want to keep him from being with his team or eating. "No, go clean yourself up and go meet your team."

"I don't need to go meet them. I'd rather stay on the phone with you."

"I don't want you to miss out on anything because of me. Go be with your team and eat. We'll talk tomorrow. Goodnight, Law."

"Sweet dreams, Pretty Girl." Both of us hesitate to end the call, but eventually I do.

I toss and turn, not able to sleep until I grab his pillow hugging it tightly. I whisper the words I'm too afraid to admit. "I love you, Law." Finally, sleep takes me into the darkness.



Chapter Eighteen

BRINLEY

“**W**hy are you sulking?” Kenzi plops down on the couch beside me.

I’m sitting here watching a show, how is that sulking? “I’m not sulking.”

“Then who ran over your puppy?”

“I don’t have a puppy.”

“Exactly.” She throws her arm over my shoulders and pulls me into her side. “It’s okay to miss him, B.”

Pushing away from her, I sit up and cross my legs on the cushion. “He’ll be back in four hours. I don’t miss him.” That’s a lie. I miss him. I miss him so much it hurts. I can’t focus on anything. I’m distracted in class and at work. The highlight of my day is seeing his text messages and talking to him at night. I have gone from hating him to loving him and now I’m a pathetic mess because he’s gone. I’m crazy and it’s his fault because he makes me this way. Dragging my gaze to hers I ask, “Why are you on the Lawson train now?”

Her eyes narrow like she's trying to figure me out. "I'm on the train that's going to make my friend happy. I'll be the first to admit that I didn't like Lawson when we first met because he hurt you, but damn, B." She squeezes my hand with hers. "I see the way he is with you. He loves you through and through and not many people ever get to experience that kind of love."

I sigh and lean my head back on the couch. I can't believe I'm going to say these words out loud even though I am scared to death to actually admit it to anyone. Even Sammi. I haven't told her anything that's happened between us, not even that we're living together. I made Fisher promise not to tell either, but I know the questions will come when we're back home. "I love him too, but I'm terrified of getting hurt again."

"It's okay to feel that way. Love is scary. You need to figure out if Lawson's worth the risk. In my opinion he is, and I honestly don't think he would ever hurt you again. I think that if you could have found a way to explain back then I don't think he would have ever hurt you to begin with. You two were so young and people do some stupid shit when they're young and dumb, but most of us learn from our mistakes. If you really think about it, do you see him ever hurting you again?"

Letting her words sink in, I think about every moment we've shared. We have a lifetime of history between us, is it really worth giving all of that up? I think about every grin and smirk that's reserved only for me, how he will protect me from anyone and everything in his power. There has never been a place I have felt safer than in his arms. What would have

happened that night if we would have just talked a little longer or if I wouldn't have been so desperate to be near him again? I would have told him everything that happened with my mom and why I ran away from him. He hurt me because he was hurting. I was the cause of his pain and he retaliated.

If I look past that night, do I think Lawson would ever hurt me? My head, my heart, my body, and my soul align as one and it's the same answer. No, he wouldn't.

"Did I hear you admit you love Lawson?" Fisher bounces into the room, sitting beside Kenzi.

I narrow my eyes on him. "Were you eavesdropping?"

He gives me a sly grin. "Maybe, but I agree with everything Kenz said. Girl, you know damn well that man would kill for you. There ain't no way on God's green earth he would ever hurt you again. So, do you love him?"

I sigh dramatically. "Yes, okay? I love him, but you better keep that big mouth of yours shut."

He acts like he's zipping his lips and throwing away the key. "Your secret is safe with me."

"I'm serious, Fisher, I am not ready to tell him or anyone else. I'm still trying to work it all out myself and I don't want him hearing it from someone else before I tell him."

Fisher stares me in the eye, more sincere than I've ever seen before. "I promise, Brin, he won't hear it from me. When you're ready to tell him that's your moment between you two."

I would never take that from you or him. He's been waiting a long time for you to forgive him and to love him back."

I point my finger at him. "No telling Sammi or any of our friends. NO. ONE."

He holds his hands up, palms facing me. "No one. I swear."

I nod, accepting his promise. "Okay." I blow out a deep breath. "Thank you."

Kenzi bumps his shoulder with hers. "You know what we need to do to cheer her up and celebrate this revelation of feelings? We need to go out."

"I don't feel—"

Fisher cuts me off. "Don't you dare say you don't feel like it. We're going. Get your ass up and get ready."

"How do you two do it?"

They both glance at each other and ask, "Do what?"

"Have a wild night of sex then just go back to being friends like nothing happened?"

Kenzi shrugs. "It was just sex. The three of us talked and we set boundaries before it happened."

"What she said." Fisher grins.

At the sound of my phone ringing, butterflies assault my belly and my heart hammers in my chest. I should just write pathetic in big bold letters across my forehead. Glancing at my screen, it's not Lawson. "Hey, Nanna!"

"Brinley, Honey, how are you?"

“I’m good. How are you and Pawpaw?”

“Don’t you worry about us, we’re great! You sound tired, though. What’s wrong? Are you working too much? Are classes too hard? Is that boy being nice to you?”

Laughing into the phone, I reply, “Everything is fine. But we did get an email saying the dorms are closed for the rest of the school year.”

I hear noises like she’s moving around in the house. “What the hell kind of workers do they have trying to fix that place?”

“I don’t know, but you should be receiving reimbursement from housing.”

“Well, that’s something at least. Are you staying at the apartment then?”

“Yes, Kenzi and I both will be staying.”

“Is that boy there with you?”

Don’t ask me why she started calling Lawson that boy, but she quit saying his name after I told her we had a fight and I never wanted to speak to him again. “No, he won’t be back until tonight.”

“I watched that game. His team is doing good, but it sure is a shame he’s not playing.”

My eyes widen in surprise. “You watched his game?”

“Honey, I’ve watched every game that boy has had.” Say what now? How did I not know this? “Just because of the disaster with you two’s parents, we didn’t stop loving and

supporting that boy any less. I know you two had a falling out years ago, but I'm happy to see you working it out. You were such close friends."

I gape at the phone. My mouth flops open and closed. "All those Friday nights you told me you and Pawpaw were going to play bingo you were going to his games?"

I can feel her grinning innocently like a child who just got caught doing something they shouldn't. "Let's not worry about that right now." Am I supposed to feel angry they lied or happy that they still accept him? She is a sneaky old woman. "You're still coming back for Thanksgiving next week, right?"
Nice subject change, Nanna.

"Yes, we're still coming. Lawson has a bye week and Kenzi will be with us too. It's okay that she stays at the house, right?"

"Oh, of course. I can't wait to meet her." Her voice lowers to almost a whisper. "I need those boys to come over here and help Larry with these Christmas lights. The stubborn old mule won't let me hire someone and he's going to break his neck one of these days. We're not young like we used to be."

"I hear you, Mama." Pawpaw's deep voice filters through the speaker. He has always called her mama and even after all this time he's not afraid to show her affection. I love them and could only dream of having a love like theirs one day. "Brinley, I miss you, Sweetheart."

"We'll be there. Tell Pawpaw I miss him too. I love you guys and can't wait to see you."

“Go have fun and we’ll talk soon.”

Our call ends and I go get ready for wherever Fisher and Kenzi are taking me.



“Fill ‘em up, Wiley!” Kenzi yells and slams her shot glass on the bar counter. He grabs the bottle of tequila and pours a straight line across filling the three shot glasses. The bar is not nearly as packed as it was the first night I was here.

We hold them up while she makes the toast. “Spank me. Choke me. Fuck me. But don’t ever think you can play me because you were the one getting played all along.”

“Kenzi, you’re a savage.” The three of us laugh and clink our shot glasses together. Tipping them back, we let the liquid warm our throats.

My phone alerts me of a new text.

L: Where you at?

M: Wiley’s with Kenzi and Fisher.

L: Don’t drink too much.

M: Why?

**L: Because you’re in my bed and
YGLMLYPCUYCOMFLAGG**

I slap Kenzi’s arm and show her the text. “What does this mean?”

She stares at it for only a second. “Holy shit, B!” She covers her mouth with her hand giggling. “It says you’re gonna let me lick your pretty cunt until you come on my face like a good girl.”

My cheeks flame with a mixture of embarrassment and arousal. “How the hell did you understand that so fast?”

She grins and winks. “This country girl is all slut on the inside.”

Fisher and I both burst out laughing.

I send another text.

M: How long before you get back?

Strong arms wrap around me from behind. I know who those arms belong to, and the scent of his cologne blankets me. There go those butterflies and my stupid thumping heart again. His mouth finds my ear. “You miss me, Pretty Girl?” The deep timbre of his voice shoots straight to my core. My need for him is felt in the dampness of my panties.

Spinning the stool, I spread my legs letting him stand between them. Peering up at Lawson, I’m hit directly in the chest with how much I truly did miss him and how much I really do love him. “Yes.”

Lawson’s hand tangles in my hair, grasping the back of my neck, he growls, “Fuck, I missed you too.” His lips collide with mine.



Chapter Nineteen

LAWSON

We enter Harbor city limits a couple of hours earlier than we expected to be back. I'm so fucking anxious to get to Brin and I'm out of my seat before any of the other guys. Texting, calling, and sending pictures was great and all, but it's nothing compared to having the real deal. Having her face-to-face and in my arms. That's all I fucking want right now.

"Beck?" Toby yells at my retreating form.

Spinning around, I continue to walk. I don't have time to chit chat. "Yeah?"

He jogs to my side. "Care if I come with you? I wanna see Kenzi. She texted earlier, said her and Fisher were taking Brin to Wiley's because she's been distracted and sulking the last few days." His hand clamps onto my shoulder as I turn back around. "Think that has anything to do with you being gone?"

"Sure the fuck hope it does." They would have taken an Uber since they're drinking. My car should be at the apartments. "I have a stop to make first."

We stand in front of the glass door. “What are we doing here?” Toby stares at me with pinched brows. Ignoring him, I shove the door open. The bells chime and a girl behind the counter smiles. “Hi, welcome to Washmore Café. How can I help you?”

“Where’s your boss?”

“Dean’s in the back.” Hearing his name makes me want to destroy this place. “I can go get him for you.”

“I’ll find him.” I storm toward the back with Toby following close behind.

“What are you doing, Lawson?” His tone is wary and laced with concern. I didn’t ask him to follow me here, but knowing he did without hesitation shows me he has my back on and off the field. I like all the guys on the team, but Toby’s the one I’ve grown closest to. I consider him a friend.

I find the asshole sitting at a desk staring at his computer. Standing in the doorway my fingertips dig into the palms of my hands. “I don’t know what your intentions with Brin are, but the shit stops now.” He jolts from his chair, clearly surprised by my presence. “You need someone to work you call somebody else. You touch her again and I’ll fucking kill you.”

I turn my back on him, ready to walk away, but his next words stop me in my tracks. “You think Brinley needs a little boy who knows nothing? Who thinks he can come in here marking his territory and threaten me? If you were so important to her, she wouldn’t have gotten into my car, she

wouldn't have let me take her to dinner, she wouldn't have told me you weren't someone she wanted to talk about." I drop my duffel bag onto the floor.

A mere second is all it takes for me to have my hand around his throat and him slammed against the wall. The wrinkles in the corners of his eyes and the grin plastered on his face show amusement. He thinks this shit's funny. "It wasn't a threat, it was a fucking promise. She might have gotten in your car and let you buy her some fancy ass fucking food and told you whatever she told you, but I'll tell you right fucking now, you would never have a chance with her."

"What makes you so sure?" He gasps for air as my grip tightens. His fingers claw at my arm trying to force me to release him.

Searching his features, I smile sardonically. "Because you're bringing her home to me. She's thanking you for those rides home and dinner. Then she's in my bed, screaming my name, thanking me for making her come." Releasing my hold, he doubles over coughing and wheezing while clutching his neck. I pass Toby, snatching up my bag on my way out. "Let's go."

He waits until we're outside and quickly striding in the direction of the apartments. "What was all that about? Her boss is the one who took her to Waterfront? He's like fucking thirty!"

My eyes meet Toby's. "There's something about that guy that I don't fucking like. I can't tell Brin to quit because she'll

think I'm telling her what to do and being controlling. I hate her fucking working here."

"I don't blame you. He seems like a fucking creep."

Parking in the lot at Wiley's, I pull my phone out of my pocket. Brin's not expecting me for another hour or so.

M: Where you at?

B: Wiley's with Kenzi and Fisher.

M: Don't drink too much.

B: Why?

I wickedly smile as I type out the next text.

**M: Because you're in my bed and
YGLMLYPCUYCOMFLAGG.**

I'm already entering when her text comes through. The bar is pretty quiet tonight even though Ozzy Osbourne's "Mama I'm Coming Home" is blaring out of the jukebox. I easily find her at the counter before I read her text.

B: How long before you get back?

Pressing my front against her back, I wrap my arms around her. Fuck, it feels entirely too good to have her in my arms again. My fingertips ghost across the side of her neck as I move strands of her silky hair. My mouth meets her ear. "You miss me, Pretty Girl?"

Spinning the stool, she opens her thighs letting me stand between them. Peering up at me, I see the truth shining back at me. "Yes."

Cradling the back of her neck with a fistful of hair, my tone lowers. “Fuck, I missed you too.” Our lips crash together.

Stepping back, I take her hand. “You look beautiful.” Her hair falls down her back in waves and her makeup is subtle. “I’m burning that dress when we get home.” It’s a tight, short, black dress with a thick strap on one shoulder. It accentuates all of her curves and leaves little to the imagination. If I see one motherfucker looking her way, I will stab their fucking eyes out.

Her mouth drops open. “What? You burn my dress, Lawson, and I’ll set fire to your collection of football jerseys.”

Narrowing my gaze in challenge, I scoff. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She mimics me. “Try me.” She would. She absolutely would.

I concede. “Fine, but you never wear it outside of the apartment again. Deal?”

She smirks knowingly. “Deal.” She thinks she won, but I never agreed to not rip it off her body which I will be doing later.

The bartender pours another round of shots, but adds two extra for me and Toby. “What’s your name?”

He glances up at me with a deep frown and cocked brow. “What’s the name of this place?”

“Wiley’s.”

“Then what the fuck do you think my name is?” He walks off shaking his head mumbling, “Idiot teenagers.”

Everyone cackles at my expense. “Shut the fuck up. I was trying to be nice,” I grumble, taking the shot glass and tipping it back.

“Does he look like the type of man that cares if you’re nice?” Kenzi smirks.

Toby helps Kenzi stand. “Let’s go in the back and play pool.”

Fisher sits at a table with Kenzi and Brin while Toby racks the balls and I grab the sticks. “Our first game after break is in Alabama. They’re a tough team and stomped our asses into the ground last year.”

I line up the cue ball and take my shot. The balls knock together but none make it into a pocket. “We’ll beat them. Our team is strong and we’re undefeated.”

Toby walks around the table looking for his best chance to sink a ball. “I don’t know, man. Their defense is better and Kendrick...it threw him off his game. All I’m saying is give it your all at practice because if it goes like it did last year you might not be benched finally.”

How am I supposed to feel about that? On one hand, I want Kendrick to play his best and we win. On the other hand, I want my shot more than anything because I’ve worked so fucking hard for it. I’m not going to get my hopes up, but Toby

can bet his ass I'll practice harder than I ever have if it gets me my moment to shine. "Thanks."

"What the hell was that?" Toby ran the table. "If football doesn't work out for you there's always being a fucking pool shark." I put my stick back in the holder.

"I've been playing for years. It's one of the reasons I love this place." He positions a few balls in certain places. "My dad taught me how to play then started teaching me trick shots." He checks his aim and takes the shot. The three solids go different directions, each dropping into a pocket.

I pull Brin out of her chair then sit with her in my lap. "Are you close with your dad?"

"He's dead," he states while swallowing another shot of tequila.

"Fuck, I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "You didn't know. Hey, Kenz, wanna get out of here?"

She looks between all of us. "Sure."

Fisher's acting like he's not bothered that Toby only asked Kenzi, but the tic in his jaw says otherwise. "I'm ready to get out of here too."

Kenzi waves bye. "I'll see you guys later."

"Let's go, guys." Brin stands, but takes my hand, lacing our fingers together.



Chapter Twenty

BRINLEY

I'm waiting in Lawson's room while he's in the bathroom. Turning his stereo on, I shuffle through stations until I find one I like. I may not be ready to say the words out loud to him yet, but I am ready to show him and prove to him that he owns all of me. Stripping out of my dress and panties, I stand waiting.

The door clicks and softly opens. My heart gallops, pulse races, and those butterflies take flight in my belly. Lawson closes us in his room. "Are you—" his words are lost when his eyes find me. His Adam's apple bobs with a hard swallow. "You're so fucking beautiful, Brin." He blinks like he's trying to shove back emotions.

"I'm ready, Law." My fingers twist together in anticipation.

I love the way he gazes at me. Like I'm the only girl he sees. He tells me I'm beautiful all the time, but when he looks at me, I feel the truth behind his words. He gives me the confidence to tell him my wants and needs. He never makes me ashamed or embarrassed to show myself to him.

“Ready for what, Brin? I need words to know exactly what we’re talking about here.”

“I’m ready to give myself to you. I’m ready to have sex and I want you to be the one. You were right, every part of me has always been yours. I’m ready to give this part of myself to you.”

Stalking closer, he tugs his shirt over his head, and then frees himself from the rest of his clothing. Both of us stand frozen, naked, and unsure of what to do next. It’s not an awkward moment or uncomfortable, it’s like he feels the same nerves that are choking me right now. “Are you sure about this?”

Closing the distance between us, I wrap my arms around his neck. My gaze locks with his. “I am one-thousand percent sure.”

His hands cradle my cheeks. “I’ll be as easy as I can, but it’s going to hurt.”

“I know. I trust you.”

His arm snakes around my waist, his lips meld with mine, and we’re taking steps. He yanks the comforter down and lowers me onto his bed. Scooting myself, I lay my head on the pillow while he kneels between my parted thighs. I take in his beautiful body, but what has my heart pounding out of my chest is the love I see shining in his eyes. “I love you, Pretty Girl.”

I want to say the words, but they're stuck in my throat. "I know you do." He nods. I see the flash of hurt that passes through his features, but as quickly as it appeared it vanished. Lawson opens my legs, and he lowers his face. Leaning up, I caress his jaw. "Not tonight."

"I need to get your body ready."

"I'm ready," I say confidently. "I only want you tonight. I want to feel you inside me."

He sighs heavily, his resolve breaking. Reaching over, he pulls a condom out of the drawer. I watch as he sheathes himself in the latex then covers my body with his. His mouth hovers inches above mine. "I'm going to ask you again, are you sure you're ready? If you want me to stop then tell me."

Weaving my fingers through his hair, I say with absolution, "I'm ready."

He nods before I feel the tip of him pressing into me. Ruelle and Fleurie sing "Carry You" as Lawson slowly enters me. Both of us hiss, me from the burn of him stretching me open. "Are you okay?" he asks through gritted teeth.

I take a couple deep breaths. "I'm okay."

Inch by inch I feel him more, going deeper until he stops. "This is going to hurt. Fuck, I don't want to hurt you. I don't think I can do this, Brin." His forehead falls onto my shoulder.

Cupping his jaw, I bring his eyes back to mine. "I want this. I want you, all of you, I don't want you to stop. I know you

don't want to hurt me, but this pain... you're hurting me in the best possible way, Law."

He presses his lips to mine and murmurs, "Breathe." I suck in air, when I do, he thrusts and a jolt of searing pain seizes me. I cry out with a tear sliding down my cheek. "I'm sorry," he repeats over and over against my lips.

"I'm okay." I breathe deeply in and out, in and out. Lawson lays perfectly still above me giving me all the time I need to get used to the intrusion. He peppers kisses along my collarbone, his tongue trails the column of my neck, then his lips are separating mine and devouring. It might have been seconds or minutes I don't know, but gentle caresses of his fingertips along my body and the feel of his tongue tangling with mine made the pain subside. I no longer feel the burning discomfort, instead I feel a burning need for this man. "I don't feel any pain anymore. I want you to move."

"Thank fuck." The words whoosh out of him as he pulls almost all the way out before thrusting back in. "Fuck, you're so goddamn tight."

Wanting to experiment, I move my hips, matching his rhythm to see how it feels. "Oh!"

He grins down at me. "Feel good?" I nod wide-eyed. "Keep doing it. It feels good for me too."

His pace quickens, so does mine. He lifts himself and looks down. "Look at how well you're taking me." Glancing down, I watch him sliding in and out.

“Lawson,” I whimper when I feel my climax building.

“I got you, Pretty Girl.” He spreads his thighs further apart causing me to feel him impossibly deeper. With each pistoning drive, he hits a spot inside me. His finger finds my clit, delivering fervent strokes. The combination lights my body on fire.

“Oh, God!” I scream to the heavens. My nails rake over his pecs and washboard abs, leaving red marks. My hips buck wildly, chasing my looming orgasm.

“Fuck!” Lawson growls as powerful as he is. “You feel so fucking good. Come for me, Pretty Girl. Come all over my cock, show me how much you love this.” Our sounds of pleasure drown out the music and the headboard banging against the wall.

My body tightens, my toes curl, my legs are shaking, and I dig my nails into his reddened sweaty flesh. “Lawson!” I cry out as my orgasm rips through my body like I have never felt before.

“That’s it. Good girl,” he coos. “Fuck, I feel your cunt pulsing around me.” His pumps into me harder and faster, his finger flicks my sensitive spot only causing my orgasm to prolong and intensify.

Tears leak from my eyes. “Don’t stop!” I beg and plead. “Please. Don’t stop!”

“Never!” he groans. “Eyes on me.” My hooded eyes open colliding with his heady ones. “You’re about to come again.”

“It never stopped!” I mewl. It died down, but never fully stopped and I immediately felt that building again. “It’s getting stronger.” My lips quiver.

“Let go, Pretty Girl. Give me everything you got.” I feel him everywhere. Stars dance in my vision. My release pushes forward. I feel like I have no control over my body. My mouth drops open and I’m trying to make sounds, but I don’t hear anything. Suddenly there’s a gush of hot liquid between my thighs. The last I remember is Lawson moaning, “Fuck! Yes!” before I am pulled into a blackness.

My eyes flutter open. Glancing to the side, Lawson is watching me. His grin widens. “There she is.”

I cover my eyes with my arm. “What the hell did you do to me?”

The bed shakes from his laughter. “I told you I would make you come so hard you’d black out.” Leaning over, he presses his lips to mine. “We made a mess. I’m going to start the shower for you and clean the bed.”

I stare into his eyes. “Thank you.”

His brows pull down tightly. “For what?”

“For being you and giving me the best night of my life. Was it good for you?”

“Brin, good doesn’t even describe what that was between us.” He takes my hand lacing our fingers together and kisses my hand. “I don’t want you to regret this.”

I shake my head. “I would never regret what happened tonight.”

Lawson presses his lips against my forehead. “I hope not. I’m going to start the shower.”

Waiting until he shuts the door, I sit up gently because I am sore. I look down at the sheet to see the mess he was referring to. My cheeks heat with embarrassment when I see how much blood there is and the huge wet spot.

I drop my face into the palms of my hands. “What’s wrong?” Lawson sits beside me. I hear the worry in his tone. He tugs at my hands until they drop into my lap. His finger and thumb press into my chin, he turns my face making me look at him. “What’s wrong?” he repeats.

“I knew there would be some blood, but this...it looks like you murdered my vagina and threw a bottle of water on top. This is horrific.”

He sucks in his lips to keep from laughing. “I can assure you that I didn’t murder your pussy. I might have beat it up good, but murder no. As far as you squirting that was hot as fuck and I plan on making you do it again.” He lets go of my hand only to wrap it around the back of my neck, fingers tangling through my hair. “Don’t be embarrassed or ashamed about what I made your body do. As far as I’m concerned you...” He pulls me closer. “Listened like my good fucking girl should have.” His tongue invades my mouth. He kisses me like he’s claiming me, like he needs me to survive, and I give it right back. Breaking away too soon but leaving me

breathless, he reminds me, “Shower. I’ll join you after I fix the bed.”



Chapter Twenty-One

LAWSON

Reaching out, I feel the bed beside me for Brin. She must have already woken up because she's not here. I slowly open my eyes and rub them. Last night replays in my head, taking Brin's virginity, she will never understand what it meant to me for her to give me that part of herself. We've come a long way, but she's still holding back, I can feel it. It hurts like hell that I tell her I love her, and she can't say it back, but I understand she's not ready yet. She couldn't possibly think after last night that she can still walk away from us, right? She can't think I would just let her go like that, right?

Grabbing a pair of boxers out of my drawer, I slip them on while still trying to figure out what's going through Brin's head. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to answer that unless she tells me what the actual fuck she's thinking. It's our last day here before we leave for Cape Cove and I'm ready for the break. I'm anxious to see how she'll act toward me back home. Is she going to close herself off or will she be more open and willing to give this a shot with us? I think while we're there it's going to be time that I push her a little harder into admitting how she feels about me. If she still wants this to

just be fun it might be time for me to walk away before she obliterates me.

Walking out to the kitchen, I open the fridge. I feel four sets of eyes on me and there is a chorus of laughter and snickering. “That’s one nice heart shaped ass you got there.” *What the fuck, Kenzi!*

“Does anyone else feel that breeze?” Now Fisher’s not making any sense. There is no breeze in this apartment.

“Lawson, you might want to go assess the situation you have going on right now.” Toby puts emphasis on ass. They cackle harder.

“What the fuck are y’all talking about?”

Brin snorts while wiping her eyes. She tries to breathe through her laughter. “Don’t listen to them, Law, I love your ass. I wanted to show you how much.” I glance over my shoulder and look down. There’s a gaping hole in my boxers cut out in the shape of a goddamn heart.

“Motherfucker!”

Rushing back to my room, Brin follows quickly behind. Standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed and a shit-eating smile. I rummage through my drawer, pulling out every pair I own. “You cut every fucking pair?”

She steps into the room, shutting us in as she does. “Are you ready to admit that I won and I’m the queen of pranks?”

I throw the pile of boxers onto the bed and stalk toward her. Her spine meets the wall. "I'm calling the truce. You win."

She eyes me, seeming skeptical. "Really?"

My mouth latches onto the side of her neck. I suck her flesh between my lips. "Mmhm. Besides I have something better to win."

"What's that?"

"You."

Backing away, I skate my hand over her shirt, feeling the curve of her breast, and up, stopping at her neck. "Remember we talked about punishment?"

I feel her throat bob against the palm of my hand. "Yes."

"I want your ass bare." Releasing Brin, I wait for her to remove her shorts and panties. "Good girl. Walk to the dresser, hands on top, and bend over."

She's the only female I have ever given praise to because no one else has ever mattered. After the night Brin gave me that blow job, I always fantasized about having her on her knees, telling her how good of a job she was doing and how much of a good girl she was. Maybe it's because that's what I really wanted to say that night but didn't. I don't know, but I'm not going to hold back with her. This will be a first in the punishment department for me as well as her. I want to make it good for her, but I know she's still sore from last night.

"Watch in the mirror. Don't take your eyes off me. Understand?"

She bites her lip and nods. "I understand."

Laying my palm against her round plump cheek, I move my hand in circles rubbing her flesh. Pulling back, I swing forward aiming perfectly. She jerks, but her eyes don't leave me. "How was that?"

She smirks. "I think you can do better."

I cock a brow. She's testing me. I land the second slap harder this time. "Count."

"Oh, fuck!" Her hips sway. "Two. Again."

The third jolts her forward, but she holds herself steady. Her tanned skin is now rosy pink with a clear outline of my handprint. My dick hardens at the sight of marking her. Looking into the mirror, her head is dropped and she's breathing heavily. "You okay?"

"I'm good. I promise. Three."

"In that case..." I fist her hair, yanking her head up. "I told you not to take your eyes off me." Did I go too far? I watch for her reaction in the mirror. Her mouth is gaping, pupils are dilated, and she's panting. She loves it and she's turned on. *You're not the only one, Baby.*

The fourth swat I do on the opposite cheek. I want both red with my prints. I deliver two more. "Six! Lawson."

"Yes, Pretty Girl?"

"I need you. I need to come so fucking bad."

My tongue glides across the seam of my lips. “How wet are you for me?” I don’t need her to tell me. Sticking my leg between hers, I spread her thighs open. My finger glides through her pussy. She whimpers when I remove my finger. She watches in the mirror as I place it on her lips. “Your cunt is soaked for me. Suck my finger clean.” She doesn’t hesitate. “You’re such a good girl. I think you deserve a reward.”

“Please!” she whimpers.

My dick is so hard for her it hurts. I step to my weight bench and lay down. “C’mere, Pretty Girl, and fuck my face.”

After she’s in position, I reach up with my fingers, and spread her pussy lips open. My tongue circles her tight little pearl. “Lawson!” Her legs are already trembling, she’s going to come fast and hard. Changing to quick flicking movements, her hips begin to buck wildly. She fists the bar to give her something to hold onto. “Oh, God!”

Brin lowers herself even more, almost cutting off my way to breathe. Who needs air when I can breathe her in, she is my survival. “Right there! Don’t stop!” My tongue strums faster and harder. She chases the release that’s coursing through her body. “I’m gonna come. I’m gonna come.” I suck her into my mouth and latch onto her clit. She explodes and the sweet tangy taste of her bursts on my tongue. I ease her down from the blissful state by lazily lapping her until the aftershocks have vanished. Sitting up, I hold her against my chest. “You’re so good at that.”

Chuckling, I reply, “I’m glad you approve.”

She straightens her body and searches my features. “Do you do it because you want to or because you feel like you have to?”

My brows knit. I’m confused by her question and wondering where the hell it’s coming from. “I do it because I want to. I want your pleasure, all of it, and it’s a huge turn on for me knowing how much you love it.”

She stares off for a moment like she’s contemplating my answer. Her resolved gaze moves back to mine. “I want to please you too.”

“You do,” I state. What the hell is going on in that head of hers?

Standing up, she rests her hands on her hips. “Off with the boxers, Law.” I almost burst out laughing because of the serious tone and look on her face. But that would ruin the moment. Getting up from the bench, I follow her orders. She points to the bed. “Sit.” She’s so fucking cute trying to be demanding. I don’t know what she has planned, but I’m not going to question it.

After sitting, she pushes my knees apart before she drops to hers. “I want all of your pleasure too.” She wraps her hand around my shaft, fingers not able to touch because of my width, but goddamn her hand feels good. She strokes me a few times before leaning closer.

My eyes widen in surprise. “Brin?” I don’t want her to feel like this is something she has to do. Especially not after that night.

She peers up at me. “I want to.” Her tongue circles the crown and plays with my piercing before she sucks me into her mouth.

“Oh, fuck!” One hand fists the comforter while the other takes her hair grasping a fistful. My eyes roll as she works her mouth on my cock, head bobbing up and down furiously before stopping. She pulls all the way back only leaving the tip between her lips. She suctions her mouth sucking the crown and shaft back in making it feel tight and so fucking good. “You suck my cock so good. You’re doing such a good job, Pretty Girl.” She mumbles something incoherently. “I can’t understand you.”

She releases me with a pop. “I said fuck my mouth.” Goddamn this girl is seriously going to be the death of me. I love her filthy mouth and that she’s not afraid to say what she wants when it comes to her sexual needs.

“Put me back in your mouth then move your hand.” She obeys perfectly. Tightening my hold on her hair, I jolt my hips upward repeatedly. She fists the comforter turning her knuckles white. Her mouth feels so fucking good. Wet and hot and just as I remember.

“Gag for me, Pretty Girl.” I drive in and out of her mouth in rapid succession. I feel my cock hitting the back of her throat, it’s going to be sore along with her pussy. Her throat constricts giving me exactly what I wanted. “Good fucking girl! That’s what I wanted to hear.” I groan. “Eyes on me.” She peers up with tears sliding down her cheeks and drool leaking from the

corners of her mouth. “Fucking perfect. Look at those beautiful tears.” I let go of the comforter to wipe them away. Laying my thumb against the flat of my tongue, I taste the saltiness.

My spine begins to tingle and my muscles strain. “Pull my balls tight and massage them.” She does exactly as I asked, but with her other hand she uses her fingers to massage my taint. “Up on your feet!” I rush the words out. I have never had anyone touch me there but fuck me if it doesn’t have me resting my heels on the bed and spreading my legs as far as I can to give her better access. “Fuck me!” I bellow.

Something is happening inside my body that I have never felt before. “I’m going to come, Brin!” I grit through clenched teeth. It’s the only warning I can give, but she doesn’t try to move away. She continues to let me thrust into her mouth and she doesn’t stop the massages. One final stroke and I stop at the back of her throat. I feel her swallows as she drinks from me. My entire body shakes uncontrollably, and I see stars dancing in my vision. When I feel the last twitch, I pull out of her mouth and lift her into my lap. “That was fucking incredible.” Our lips crash together.

“One more day and we’re headed home. I can’t wait for no football practices for you and no work for me, no classes for either of us.” This is the first time she’s hinted at wanting to spend time with me back home. My heart constricts inside my chest. I can’t help but get my hopes up that maybe just maybe she’s wanting more than just some fun.

“Me too, Pretty Girl.”



“Alright, Team, listen up!” Coach Patterson claps his hands together. “This is our last practice until after break. I don’t want you getting lazy on me, so continue doing your daily weight training and cardio.”

“Yes, Coach,” we reply as a solid group.

“Our first game after break is against Alabama on their stomping grounds. For all the newcomers, let me tell you this team is tough. We lost to them last year, but we won’t let that happen again, will we?”

“No, Coach!”

He scans the locker room until his eyes meet mine. “Beck, you make sure you know those plays. You’ve been doing an excellent job at practices. You’re the backup QB so be ready if we need you.”

Toby elbows my arm. “I’ll be ready, Coach.”

“You won’t need him, Coach, I got this.” Kendrick gives me a smirk that tells me there is no shot in hell I’m getting on that field.

Coach crosses his arms over his chest making his pot belly more noticeable than usual. “Is that right, Kendrick?”

He nods. “That’s right, Coach.”

Coach lifts his hand, rubbing his chin. “Did you have it last year when you threw three interceptions? Did you have it last year when you didn’t follow plays and were sacked how many times? I understand that you’re up for number one draft pick this year, but let me give you a piece of advice, Kendrick. That cockiness of yours will be your downfall. How many NFL teams are going to want to keep a player that thinks he’s out on that field alone? It doesn’t matter if a newbie is benched waiting for their spot, they are still on your team. It doesn’t matter if you are the QB for this team, I’m the coach.” He points beside him. “Coach Anderson is assistant coach. We run this team, so keep up with your snide remarks and your better than everyone else attitude and I’ll replace you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Kendrick is pissed. His jaw is ticcing, and that smirk has been wiped clean off his smug face. “Ah, shit,” Toby mumbles beside me. “Coach is seeing you now. Good work, Beck.”

“Get on the field for practice.” Coach turns his back and walks away.

Coach Anderson slaps my shoulder and holds me back while everyone else makes their way onto the field. “Your time’s coming and when it does remember this moment. Kendrick used to be just like you sitting on that bench itching for his shot. Look at him now. Stay humble and never forget where you come from. We see your hard work and dedication, don’t think we don’t. You’re going places, Beck, and you’re better than most.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Get out there.” Leaving the locker room, I run through the tunnel and out onto the field.

Coach Patterson blows his whistle. “We’ll start with skill training and from there we’ll move on to speed training.”

Coach Anderson throws me a ball. “Shuffle drill.” I get into position with my feet spread and knees bent. I shuffle to the right, flip and throw, hitting my target. I repeat those steps but in the opposite direction. We run through the drill a few times before moving on to the next.



Chapter Twenty-Two

BRINLEY

I clock out at the end of my last shift before we head to Cape Cove in the morning. I am so excited for this break and for it to be my very last shift at Washmore Café. The uncomfortable feeling has only increased because I can feel Dean watching me all the time while here at work. Having his eyes on me makes me feel dirty.

I can't wait to see Nanna and Pawpaw, and see all of my friends. "You guys have a good Thanksgiving break," I call out while putting my coat on and grabbing my purse.

"Brinley, wait!" Dean blocks me from leaving. "I wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"Okay." I grab my purse off the hook and put it over my shoulder. "What's up?"

His fingers start to brush hair away from my forehead, but I turn my face. The thought of him touching me is repulsive, especially now with what's happening between me and Lawson. "I hope you have a good break, and I would like to talk when you get back."

“Talk about what? Why not talk now?”

“You deserve better than him.” He glances down and takes my hand in his. “I like you, Brinley, a lot. I can give you more than he can. You don’t have to give me an answer right now. Just think about it over break and we can talk more about us when you get back.”

“Us?” I yank my hand out of his. “There is no us, Dean. You’re my boss and you don’t know anything about Lawson. Get out of my way.” I push past him.

Dean yells at my retreating back. “You really want to be with someone that goes around threatening people?”

My steps halt, I glance over my shoulder. “What are you talking about?”

He crosses his arms with a satisfied smirk. “I’m talking about your little boyfriend coming in here threatening me because he knows there’s something between us. All I’m asking is for you to think about it. Think about if he’s really what you want or could you see yourself giving me a chance?”

“I gotta go.”

I run out of the café and over to Lawson’s car. Slamming the door, I turn my accusing gaze on him. “You threatened him? I thought you were going to leave it alone.”

He pulls out of the parking space. “You thought wrong.”

Gawking, my mouth flops open. “That’s all you’re going to say? I thought wrong! You can’t go around threatening my boss or every guy that makes a pass at me.”

“If your boss wasn’t a fucking creep, I wouldn’t have to threaten him. Other guys aren’t fucking stupid. They know what would happen if they made a move for you.”

After getting out of the car, I slam the door closed. “I can’t with you!”

Lawson’s feet pound the pavement behind me as he yells, “You know good and goddamn well I wasn’t going to let that shit slide.” Ignoring him the rest of the way to the apartment, I open the door and stomp to my room, locking the door. “Brin?” Lawson bangs on the door. “Unlock the fucking door.”

“Go away.”

“Fine. Come talk to me when you’re done with your little fit.”

“I’ll be done when you’re done being an asshole.”

“I’ll stop being an asshole when you open your fucking eyes.” I hear his own bedroom door slam shut.

There’s a quieter knock. “B, it’s me.” Jumping off the bed, I unlock the door letting Kenzi in our room, but I make sure to lock it again. “Trouble in paradise?”

Sitting on the bed cross-legged, I hold a pillow against my chest. “He threatened Dean and didn’t tell me. I had to hear it from Dean himself.”

Kenzi lays on her back staring up at the ceiling. “Are you pissed off that he actually threatened him or that he kept it from you?”

“Both and I wish that he would trust that I’m not going to let anything happen between me and Dean. I don’t want my boss.”

“I’m going to be honest here, B. I’m claiming Switzerland, so I’m not on anyone’s side, but I don’t think you’re seeing the whole picture here.”

“What am I missing?”

She takes a minute before answering like she’s being careful with her words. “You love him, right?” I nod. “You had to fall back in love with him, B, but he’s loved you all along. Think of it like this, say he worked close with a woman, and everyone knew this woman wanted him, even you knew it. This woman was persistent and took him out to eat, and just kept trying to make him want her. How would that make you feel?”

I don’t need to think about it because the way my stomach knots with jealousy is enough. “I’d want to cut a bitch.”

“Now, what happens between you two every time Lawson tries to tell you he doesn’t like you working there or that you don’t need that job?”

“We fight.”

“Okay, back to the woman and Lawson.”

I expel an exaggerated breath. “Do we have to?” I hate the thought of him with someone else. I had to deal with that enough in high school when I hated him. It makes me physically ill picturing it now.

“Yes, we do. You know Lawson loves you, so would you trust him when he says he would never let anything happen?” I nod. “Would you trust her around Lawson?”

“Hell no!”

She turns on her side, resting her head on her fist. “I think where Lawson is coming from is that it’s not you he doesn’t trust. He wasn’t in the wrong for threatening Dean because the guy is giving major ick vibes. I think Lawson’s keeping his mouth shut about wanting you to quit because he’s avoiding fighting with you. He’s wanting to keep you happy because he’s scared you’re going to walk away.”

I hug the pillow tighter. “I’m not leaving him, Kenzi, I love him. I’m so in love with him it hurts. And you know I said this would be my last shift there.”

Kenzi reaches over with her free hand and gently squeezes my knee. “I know all this, and you do too, but does Lawson? Does Lawson know you’re in this for the long haul? Does he know you love him? Does he know you’re telling Dean you quit and that today was your last shift?”

“No.”

“Then start there.”

“We have this place back home called The Coves. You’ll see it when we’re there. I want to tell him then.”

“I approve, B.” She winks with a dazzling smile. “Now that my job here is done, I’m meeting Fisher after his study group, so go make up with your lover boy.”

I silently laugh. "I think I might make him sweat it out. Thanks, Kenzi." Wrapping my arms around her, I squeeze tightly. "I'm happy they chose us to be dorm roomies."

"Me too, but I can't breathe." Letting go of her, she sucks in air. "Love ya, home-skillet."

"Love you too. You two kids don't stay out too late, we're leaving early in the morning."

"Yes, Mommy."



Stepping out of the shower, I wrap a towel around my body. I held out for a couple of hours, but I think it's time we talked. "Just Pretend" by Bad Omens blares through his stereo, I don't think he would hear me if I knocked. Deciding to just open the door, I cross the threshold, closing the door behind me. He's laid back on his weight bench lifting I don't even know how much weight. The thought of what he did to me on that weight bench this morning causes a flood of desire to consume me. I walk to the stereo and turn the music down. I lick my lips wetting them, my mouth is suddenly drier than a desert as I watch his arms flex with the weight he's lifting.

The bar slams onto the pegs, he sits up drenched in sweat. What is it about his sweaty body that turns me into an instant puddle of horniness? Grabbing a towel he had lying between his parted legs, he wipes his face and chest. The predatory look in his piercing blue eyes shoots straight between my thighs. "C'mere." Stepping around the bed, I stop at the end of

the bench, and peer down at him. His hands skate up and down the backs of my thighs while gazing up at me. “You need to understand something, Brin. I’m fighting like hell to keep you from walking away. I’m not going to let someone fuck up everything I’m fighting so fucking hard for. Your boss...I’m telling you...there is something not right with the way he is toward you. That’s not me being jealous or possessive, I can fucking feel it, Brin.”

I cup his jaw with my hands. “I know you are and I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“I don’t want to talk about him anymore.” Dropping the towel, I stand bare in front of Lawson. His lustful gaze sweeps over my body.

His lips lightly touch my hip bone, and he kisses across my belly before dipping his tongue into my belly button. Goosebumps pebble my flesh. “How sore are you?”

Without answering, I walk to his nightstand and pull out a condom.

Lawson stands up from the weight bench and shoves his basketball shorts down his thick muscular thighs. He sits on the bed, back against the headboard. Straddling him, I tear the wrapper open and do my best to sheath him in the latex.

Lifting up, I position myself and gently ease him inside, stopping when I’m seated to the hilt. It’s not as painful this time, but my body still needs a minute to adjust.

I find a slow steady rhythm, moving my hips up and down his long shaft. I feel him so much deeper with me on top. His hands splay against my back, he leans closer circling my hard nipple with the tip of his tongue before sucking it into his mouth. A heady moan escapes my lips. He releases me only to skim across the valley of my breasts to lavish the other with as much attention.

He gives my collarbone and neck featherlight kisses. Stopping at my ear, he whispers, “You’re so wet for me, Pretty Girl.”

His hand fists my hair, our mouths crash together in a kiss consumed by teeth and tongues. We swallow our sounds of pleasure while my rhythm quickens.

“Lawson!” I cry out at the first wave of bliss I feel wash over me.

“We’re switching positions.” Lifting me off him, he sits up on his knees and spreads his legs slightly before resting on the heels of his feet. “Straddle me, but this time face the door.” I follow his instructions and let him take control.

Lawson’s hands guide my hips downward, both of us hissing once he’s sliding back inside me. I feel him impossibly deeper this way and it feels amazing. “It feels so good,” I moan. My head lolls back and eyes close as I focus on every visceral thrust he delivers.

One of his arms encompasses me, my back against his rock-hard chest. Lawson tweaks and rolls my nipple between the pads of his finger and thumb, while the other arm snakes

around my belly. His hand lowers until he's strumming my clit. "Yes!" My nails cut into the flesh of his thighs.

He kisses the shell of my ear. "I want your hot little cunt sopping for me."

"I want that, oh God, I want it so bad."

His tone deepens as he growls, "Who are you?"

"I'm your good girl."

"That's right. Now, beg for it like the good fucking girl you are."

"Please!" I whimper. "Please make me come. I need it. Prove who owns me." I never ever thought I would be one to dirty talk, but Lawson brings it out of me, and I love it. It makes me enjoy it even more knowing how much he loves it also.

He chuckles, not in a humorous kind of way, but in a 'you have no idea what you just asked for' sort of way. With lightning speed, I'm shoved forward onto my hands and knees, Lawson towers over me from behind. His fingers grip my hips so tight I know he's going to leave bruises to remind me.

He pounds into me brutally, our sweaty bodies slap together, and the sounds coming out of me are incoherent. "I fucking own this pussy, Pretty Girl." Damn right he does along with every other part of me. "Play with your clit."

My hips move on their own accord matching him thrust for thrust while he hits that spot inside me. My finger rubs against that sensitive button and my body lights on fire.

“That’s it, Baby, chase it. Don’t you fucking stop until you’re coming all over my cock. Fuck, look at you doing such a good job taking all of me.”

It’s building higher and higher yet it’s still out of reach. “I’m so close.” Tears prick my eyes.

“You ready to see the stars?” I feel his wet thumb press against my backside.

“Oh, God!” The added sensation is almost too much to take. He slowly pushes in and out. Each time he enters a little more just like the first time he touched me there. It feels so good. “More!”

He gives me exactly what I need, and he was right, stars dance in my sight as I hit the peak and it rockets through my body. “Fuck!” Lawson roars as he fills the condom.

Neither of us move until our panting breaths are under control and the aftershocks have subsided. Lawson falls onto the bed beside me. His gaze meets mine. He takes my hand in his and intertwines our fingers, kissing each of my knuckles. No words need to be spoken, we’re both thinking the same thing, we were made for each other. It’s almost unbearable not to tell him exactly how I feel, but I want to wait. It’s only a few more days.

Some might wonder why I don’t just tell him, why do I want to wait until we’re at The Coves? It’s not like it’s a special place for us or anything, but to me it kind of is. Cape Cove is home to us, it’s where our history lies. I remember that one night last year when we went to The Coves swimming

with our friends. I hated Lawson so much then, but that night, I watched him smiling and laughing. I was smiling and laughing for the first time in so long. That night was the first time that I let myself feel the love I had for him again.

After everything we have been through, I search his eyes now and see into his soul. Lawson Beck is my home.



Chapter Twenty-Three

LAWSON

Fifty-two hours on the road and we are finally home. We have four days before we head back Friday morning. Those four days are going to be busy as shit between the wedding, our Friendsgiving, and actual Thanksgiving.

“It’s good to be home!” Brin excitedly squeals beside me as we enter Cape Cove. “Who do we go see first? I want to see Nanna and Pawpaw, but Sammi and Merick and the guys...I miss them all!”

Squeezing her thigh, I ask, “Why don’t we go to Evelyn and Larry’s to hang the Christmas lights? We can call and have everyone meet us there.”

“Yes! Great plan!” She leans over and kisses my cheek.

To our surprise everyone was already waiting at Evelyn and Larry’s when I pulled into the driveway. Brin jumps out of the car and runs to the girls. The three of them scream and cry and jump around happily.

The girls run to Fisher and practically hug him to death. “We miss you!”

“I miss you too!”

They see me and all I get is their evil stank eye. “Lawson,” they huff in annoyance.

“It’s good to see you too.” I guess that answers if Brin’s told them anything. Won’t they be shocked to find out what we’ve been up to?

“My man!” Maddox gives me a bro hug.

Axel does the same. “Hey, bro.”

“Glad to see I’m not hated by everyone.” I speak loudly so the girls can hear me.

“You guys, this is Kenzi. She started out as my dorm roommate.”

“Started off?” Sammi’s brow cocks quizzically.

“We have a lot to catch up on. Nanna, Pawpaw!” Brin runs to her grandma and grandpa. Everyone welcomes Kenzi with open arms.

Evelyn’s gaze finds mine. “That boy better get over here and give me a hug.”

Smiling and shaking my head, I jog to where she’s standing and swoop her into my arms. “It’s really good to see you.” I first met Evelyn and Larry after Brin and her mom moved in with me and my dad. They accepted me as part of their family and always treated me like their own grandson, but I didn’t come around after the divorce. Then the shit with Brin

happened and I assumed I was no longer welcome. Evelyn and Larry are two of the best people you could ever know.

Sitting Evelyn back on her feet, she pushes her graying hair off her forehead. She squeezes my biceps. “Look at you! Your team’s having one hell of season, but why aren’t you playing? Those idiot coaches don’t know what they’re missing out on by keeping you on that bench.”

My eyes widen in shock. “You’re watching my games?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? Nanna and Pawpaw lied to me all throughout high school.”

My head snaps in Brin’s direction. “What do you mean?”

She smirks while Evelyn looks sheepish. “Every Friday night these two,” she points between them, “were supposed to be playing bingo, but they were sneaking off to your games.”

“Seriously?”

Larry claps my shoulder. “You’ve always been a part of our family. We never gave up on you. Glad to see you two worked it out. Maybe you’ll come around again when you’re back in town.”

A lump forms in my throat making it hard to swallow. “I will. I promise.”

Evelyn hugs her husband. That’s one thing about Evelyn and Larry, they have so much love for each other even after all these years. I can only hope that’s me and Brin one day. “You two were always so close. I hated to see you not being friends.”

“Worked it out, hmm?” Sammi crosses her arms over her chest. She looks good and healthy, even better than she did when we first left. I mean that in a non-sexual way of course.

Brin and I glance at each other, but Larry saves either of us from having to reply. “Let’s get these Christmas lights hung, boys.”



I pull into the driveway of the two-story brick home with the column pillars and landscaped bushes lining either side of the porch. This is the house I grew up in, but it never felt like home except when Brin lived here too.

Pushing the door open, I step over the threshold. “Mom, Dad? I’m here.”

Mom floats down the stairs in all her extravagant class. She’s wearing a black designer dress, matching heels, with a pearl necklace and earrings, not a hair out of place or a flaw in her makeup. Vivian Beck is the Mayor of Cape Cove and reputation is everything to her. Heaven forbid if our family name is the topic of conversation by this gossiping town. That’s not where our money comes from though, oh no, that would be from Mom’s dad, his dad before him, and so on down the bloodline. You guessed it, she comes from old money.

“Lawson.” She places her hands on my shoulders and kisses each of my cheeks. “Your father is at the dining table. Join us for dinner.”

My dad, Bradley Beck, sits at the head of the table in his three-piece suit, salt and pepper comb-over hair, and his usual businessman scowl. The table is big enough to fit twelve. Mom sits at the opposite end while I choose one an equal distance away from the two of them. The table is decorated with prepared dishes I know neither of them took time to cook.

Dad's fingers steeple in front of his face. "Where have you been, Son, we expected you sooner?" I can tell by the irritation in his tone that he's already angry with me for making them wait.

"I had somewhere else to go before coming here." No way in hell am I going to tell them where I was.

Brin remembers the guy who played the part of good father and nice stepfather. She doesn't know the father that berates you and tells you the mistakes you made, but never speaks on the good you've done. She doesn't know the man that made you sit for hours upon hours watching football videos to make sure you didn't mess up in the next game. I love football, I love everything about it, but this man made me want to quit countless times.

She also doesn't know the woman that left me here with him. Her excuse...a boy needs his father. In reality, she didn't want to be bothered by having to take care of me. There were a lot of things I didn't understand at six years old when she moved out. As I got older shit became clearer and while I understood more of the situation, I also understood they both lacked being parents.

Yes, it was my dad's fault for cheating and breaking up our family, but even when she was here, she was absent. Nothing changed after they decided to fix what was broken and she didn't come back because she loved us. She came back to say she won. He was happy with Brin's mom, until mine stuck her claws in him again. His happiness vanished and so did his chances of being father of the year. Misery loves company.

I will never forget the satisfaction I saw on her face the day my dad told Brin's mom to get out. I will never forget the pleasure in my mom's eyes when she looked at me and said I was to never speak to Brin again. I didn't give a fuck what she said because the worst she could do was ground me. I would have taken groundings every day as long as I still had Brin.

Now, though, they could cut me off and stop paying for my share of the apartment. I have three more years until I gain access to my own trust fund my grandpa had set up for me and until I'm hopefully drafted into the NFL. Until then I'm going to use them for whatever I need.

"How are classes?" Mom asks as her fork scrapes across her plate.

I take a bite of salmon. "They're good." I wait for the next question.

"I see that coach of yours still hasn't let you play." Here we fucking go. "The end of the semester is coming up."

My angry stare cuts to his. "I'm not transferring, Dad."

His nostrils flare. “I’ve already spoken to the head coach of the top college here in California. They offered you a full scholarship, but you turned that down to move across the country to sit on a fucking bench. They are excited to have you and after the deal I made you will be on that field playing game days.”

My fork clinks against my plate. “Why would you do that? I’m not moving back here and I’m not going to be the winning prize of deals you make.” Standing up, I slam my hands onto the table. “Jesus Christ, Dad, I’m your son, just one time could you think about what would make me fucking happy?”

“Sit down,” he demands. “After dinner we’re watching the recordings of this season.”

I stare at him incredulously. “I’m not.” I laugh without an ounce of humor. He doesn’t care about one goddamn thing I said. “I’m staying with Maddox, and I won’t be back for Thanksgiving.” I walk away from the table and yell, “Thanks for the great dinner.”

“Lawson,” Mom calls out, but I slam the front door closed.



Everyone is still at Evelyn and Larry’s when I get back. Brin opens the door. “Hey, that was quick.” Her gaze searches mine. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Taking my hand, she pulls me into the house. I hear laughter and everyone talking in the living room. I wish I would have just stayed here instead of dealing with my parents. Brin leads me to her old room. “Don’t tell me it’s nothing. I can see it and feel it, something’s wrong.”

“C’mere.” I tug her into my chest and inhale her fruity scent. With her in my arms I’m at peace. “My dad is giving me until the end of the semester to be off the bench or he’s going to try and make me transfer.”

She pulls back. Peering up at me, her eyes fill with unshed tears. “No, he can’t do that. You have no control over playing or not.”

“He’s already made a deal with a coach here in California.”

The hurt and pain that I see in her glittering orbs and downturned lips fillets me open. “You’re going to leave me?” If this was just fun for her and she has plans to walk away from me then why does she look like I just crumbled her entire world?

“I don’t want to, Pretty Girl, but I may not have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.” She walks to her closet and pulls out a box. “Here.” She holds it out for me to take. “These letters are from when I didn’t think I had a choice either. I let fear rule me and lost you anyway. Looking back, I would have done everything differently. I would have risked it all to have one more moment with you back then. I could have told you everything, let her ship me off to wherever, and then I would have come back for you. Don’t let fear and threats dictate what

you want, Law. Don't make the same mistakes I did." Brin presses her lips to mine softly. "Join us when you're ready." With that she leaves me alone with the box of letters.

Sitting on the bed, I open the box and pull out the crumbled paper on top. This must be the letter her mom read.

Law,

It's been six months since I've talked to you. I hate it here and I hate Mom. When I go to bed at night I dream about our kiss and saying those three words to you. The only thing that gets me through the day is knowing one day I will have you back in my life.

Love, Brin

I open the next one.

Law,

It's bad here. Really really bad. I don't know what to do. Mom is sleeping all the time and when she's awake all she does is drink. I wish I could talk to you, but I'm too scared.

You were always there to protect me when I would have nightmares and you would chase the monsters away. You're not here to save me this time. I'm still holding onto the day I have you back.

Love, Brin

I release a deep breath of air and rub my aching chest. She needed me and I wasn't there. I can feel every ounce of fear in her words. Dad making me transfer is ripping her away from me again. What if she needs me again and I'm not there? I've

been fighting so hard to get Brin back, I can't just give up and walk away now. If I did, I would lose her forever.

Law,

I saw you today hugging and kissing Vanessa. I know you stopped trying to talk to me, but it hurts so much to see you moving on. It kills me to know I lost you and you gave up on us. Why was I so stupid to think you would wait for me like I'm waiting for you? I guess you didn't love me like I loved you and we weren't as unbreakable as I thought.

Brin

She was crying when she wrote this. I see the spots where the purple ink smeared. I would have waited if I would have known! Fuck! I fist my hair as I read the next one.

Lawson,

I ran out of the party and came home. I thought tonight was going to be our chance, but you ripped my heart out and stomped on it. I never thought I could hate someone, but I hate you, Lawson Beck. This will be my last letter to you.

Fuck you, asshole

Digging deeper into the box, I pull out another one. It's from prom last year. My brows knit in confusion.

Lawson,

It's a good thing you will never read these. I know I said I was going to stop writing you, but I couldn't. You keep apologizing, but you're going to have to do better than that to

ever get me to forgive you, so stop saying the words and show me something. Answer this, Lawson, why did it take you so long? Are you just saying you're sorry because of our friends or do you really mean it? I don't know who you are anymore.

The reason for this letter is because I wanted you to know I saw you. You think I avoid you and ignore you, but I see you, Lawson. You looked good tonight in your tux, but I would never tell you that. I wanted to dance with you, but I would have never asked you. I hate you, Lawson, but I still fucking love you. I would never admit that though.

We're going our separate ways soon and that makes me sad. Yeah, I know that doesn't make sense. The best way I can describe it is that even though we're nothing to each other now, we were still here together at home. After graduation we won't be. You'll go off to college somewhere and I'll be in Massachusetts starting a new life. I still remember our pact, so it's hard to know I'll be on this journey alone. You'll be the star quarterback like you always dreamed about, you'll fall in love with someone else, you'll start a family, and your wife will be your biggest cheerleader. But it won't be me.

Goodbye

Brin found out a couple weeks after prom where I would be going to college. I wondered why she never said much about it and now I know why. She said I followed her and that she wanted to start a new life here, but what Brin really wanted was for me to be here right beside her like we always said. She still wanted to follow through with our pact even though she

hated me. Brin knew all along why I chose Washmore University, she might have said she wanted to move on, but she never meant it. Brin chose words that she knew would cut me deep. She wanted to hurt me because she was hurting. Her love for me never died, but what would it do to us if I up and left now?

Sitting the box on the bed, I join everyone in the living room. “Brin?” She turns her smiling eyes toward me. “It took so long because I knew what I had done was unforgivable and I was ashamed. Not once did I ever apologize because of our friends, and I meant it every time I told you I was sorry. Our friends just gave me the opportunity to be in the same space as you.” I turn to Larry and Evelyn. “You always treated me like I was part of your family. So, I’m going to be honest and tell you that I’m in love with your granddaughter.” There’s a collective gasp across the room.

Larry and Evelyn glance at each other both wearing broad smiles. Evelyn snorts, “You’d have to be blind as a bat to not know that.”

“Nanna.”

Evelyn shrugs her shoulders. “What? It’s the truth. And the way you two were stuck at the hip, you love him too.” Brin’s cheeks tinge pink.

Larry stands up. Walking toward me, he pulls me into a hug. “Our door is always open to you. We all make mistakes, but learning from them is what’s really important. She’s my only grandbaby and I love her more than I love myself. There’s no

one that I would ever think could be good enough for her or trust enough to know she will always be safe.” He pulls back staring me in the eye. “Except you.”

Relief washes over me in spades. “Thank you.”

My attention drifts to Brin on the couch. She waves me over. To my surprise, she stands for me to sit in her spot then she gets comfortable in my lap. She whispers in my ear. “They’re yours now.” I know she’s referring to the letters, but with everything inside me I hope like hell she’s talking about her as well.

I look around the room, Merick on Axel’s lap, Sammi on Maddox’s, Fisher and Kenzi sitting close together. This right here is my family. They’re the ones I love and know all they want is for me to be happy. They don’t give a fuck if I play football, they would love me just the same if I worked a nine to five job or was a beach bum. I can’t say the same for my own flesh and blood. My parents hold money over my head, but money’s not what’s important. I can give up the apartment and move on campus with some of the guys on the team. Fisher could find a new roommate, Brin and I wouldn’t be living together anymore, but the point is I don’t need their money to survive. What I need is Brin and my family by choice. There’s not a chance in hell that I could leave her now. My parents can take their money and fuck off.

“I want to hear the story of Kenzi threatening Lawson.” Merick snickers.

“It all started...” Kenzi begins telling everyone in the room about our first-time meeting.

Brin lays her head on my shoulder as I tighten my arms around her waist, and we listen to Kenzi’s story. This is what contentment and pure fucking happiness feels like.



Chapter Twenty-Four

BRINLEY

Axel and Merick's moms became good friends after what happened with Dani and their kids getting engaged. They even helped Sammi plan this wonderful bachelorette party, where none of us are old enough to drink except them. Did you hear that sarcasm in my tone? That's why we're sitting on this circular velvet couch, drinking sodas, while watching them get wasted at a nightclub in Havana Hills. "We're too young for this!" Axel's mom cries while downing the rest of her White Russian.

"I know!" Merick's mom agrees. "Our babies are getting married!" Her words slur. "They're running off to God knows where." She flings her arm out. "And before we know it, we're going to be old grandmas and our lives are going to flash before our eyes."

"Aww, Mom, it's going to be okay." Merick hugs her mom and pats her back. Envy sits heavily in my belly. I'll never have a mom crying at my bachelorette party or worrying about becoming a grandma. I know I have Nanna and she's better than any mom I could ask for, but it's not the same.

“I need another drink!” Axel’s mom holds her glass up for a waitress to come over. She cries, “They will make such pretty babies though.”

The moms hug each other. “I know!” Merick’s mom agrees. “We did good with them, didn’t we?”

All of us look at each other and burst into laughter.

Kenzi takes the focus off the moms by asking in her strong southern twang, “So this city is Havana Hills and it’s rivals with Cape Cove. Merick, you’re originally from here, but ended up in Cape Cove where you met Axel? Is that right?”

Merick smiles brightly. “That’s a very condensed version, but yeah that about sums it up.”

“Time to spill the tea, girlfriend.” Sammi tips her glass toward me.

“Ugh!” I huff dramatically. “Don’t hate me for not telling you. I was trying to work everything out myself first.”

“We won’t hate you,” Merick reassures me.

“I told Lawson I wished I never met him. I thought that was the end of it, but something in the universe said nope. Not long after I told him that, all of the pipes in the girl’s dorm busted.”

Sammi and Merick both look flabbergasted. “What?”

“Did he do it?”

“No, Sammi, of course not.” I never actually thought about that. He wouldn’t do that; he wouldn’t risk getting kicked out of school. “Anyway, we needed a place to stay and neither

Kenzi nor I wanted to stay in a shelter that the university was finding us beds at. I was all for getting another Airbnb, but Fisher wouldn't let me."

Sammi screeches, "You moved in with him?"

Merick shakes her head with a knowing smile.

"I didn't have a choice! Fisher told me I would never see him, which was a lie. My head was all sorts of confused and I thought it would be a good idea to start a prank war."

Sammi smacks her forehead with wide eyes. "Oh, Jesus, Brin. Just like you two used to do when we were kids."

"Exactly. I didn't want there to be all this bad tension and make it super awkward living there. I thought that would bring some peace."

Kenzi snickers. "It brought peace alright."

Glaring at her, I continue, "My first prank was putting black paint in his toothpaste. Well, that led to some stuff happening and it's just escalated from there."

"Just escalated from there?" Sammi nods, seeming to take it all in. "What are you saying? Like are you two friends?"

Kenzi mumbles, "More than friends. So much more than friends."

Sammi glances between the two of us. "Friends with benefits?"

Kenzi shakes her head. "Nope."

“Would you be quiet, or I’ll start calling you a trifling traitor again!” Turning my attention back to Sammi, I explain. “I love him and one day I’m probably going to marry him.” That’s if he doesn’t transfer back to California. My heart sinks at the possibility of losing him again. I wouldn’t survive it again.

Sammi’s eyes soften. “We can stop hating him now?”

I snort. “Yes.”

Merick jumps out of her seat to come give me a hug. “It’s about time you two figured it out.”

Sammi takes my hand in hers and lightly squeezes. “I just want you happy. It’s always been Lawson, Brin, you just needed to figure out how to forgive. He made a mistake, but look at how many of those Axel and Maddox made. We had to learn how to forgive as well. Granted you hold a grudge better than anyone, but I’m glad you finally let it go. Be happy, Brin, let Lawson love you. You two deserve it after all you’ve been through. I’m glad I don’t have to murder him now. He was right, I don’t look good in orange.”

Grinning with tears blurring my vision, I tell her, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

My finger travels around the couch. “I haven’t told him how I feel yet, so mouths shut.”

“We won’t say a word.” There’s a chorus of agreement.

“Look at them.” Merick bursts out laughing. Our attention drifts to the dance floor where the moms don’t seem to have a

care in the world, moving their bodies to a beat that is far from the song's.

Sammi announces, "Don't worry. I called in the husbands for help."

"Speak of the devil and they shall—" Kenzi's words trail off. Glancing behind me, it's like a scene out of a movie. Axel, Maddox, Lawson, and Fisher stalk our way in all of their gorgeous sexiness. Even Fisher has a confidence tonight that I haven't seen before. The expressions on their faces scream leave me and mine the fuck alone. Merick and Axel's dads strut close behind with their own swagger.

Lawson's heated eyes trail up and down my body. "Thought I told you never to wear that dress outside the apartment."

Standing up, I wrap my arms around his neck and bring his ear to my mouth. "Maybe I wanted to be punished for being a bad girl and not listening."

His hands squeeze my ass cheeks as he tugs me closer. There is no denying the bulge I feel behind the zipper of his denim jeans. His familiar citrus and spice scent blankets me. His teeth nip at my earlobe. "My pretty girl wants to play dirty. Let's fucking play." Lawson glances around the room. "We'll be back."

Lawson carts me off to a dark corner. I can see everyone in the club a distance away, but they can't see us. He leans against the wall. Holding my back against his front, he sweeps strands of hair off my neck. "Your punishment, Pretty Girl, is

not making a sound when I make you come. I hear you, I stop.”

This is going to be torture and he knows it. “I can’t do that,” I mewl.

His hand skates down my body and his knee nudges my thighs apart. My dress rides up my legs allowing him easier access to my already wet panties. Lawson shoves them to the side and his fingers open my lips for him. He teases my clit with the perfect amount of pressure. I grasp his black button-up shirt behind me. “Lawson,” I faintly whisper.

“Be a good girl and keep quiet.”

Two fingers pump into me over and over before they’re on my sensitive spot again. I search the crowd to see if anyone notices us, but no one does. It’s an added thrill that we could be caught at any moment, it heightens the sensations coursing through my body.

“Does it turn you on thinking someone might see us? See what I do to you? Do you want them to see you come all over my fingers and you lick them clean?”

I nod against his chest, my arousal intensifying by the second.

“Maybe your punishment should be me getting you all worked up and right on the cusp of creaming all over my fingers only to stop.”

I shake my head frantically, silently begging him not to do that.

“Atta girl. Keeping quiet just like she was told.” His strokes quicken and my breathing accelerates.

One hand slams against the wall as my orgasm rocks through me while Ed Sheeran sings “Eyes Closed”. I want to yell and scream, but I bite my lip and don’t make a sound. “You’re doing such a good job,” Lawson croons in my ear. “Stay with me at Maddox’s tonight. It was hell not having you in bed with me last night.”

“Okay. I didn’t sleep much either.”

Lawson fixes my panties and pulls my dress back down. He tucks me into his side as he guides us back to the table. I don’t think I could make it on my own with how bad my legs are shaking.

Maddox smirks. “What were you two doing?”

“Talking,” I say at the same time Lawson says, “Nothing.”

Sitting on his lap, my gaze collides with his. “Nothing?” My brow arches.

He mimics me. “Talking?”

I shrug nonchalantly and bite my lip to hide my grin. “Yeah, you were doing a whole lot of talking while I listened.”

Axel and Maddox spit out their drinks.

“Do we even want to know?” Merick questions, not picking up on the innuendo.

“No. Let’s go dance, Rebel.” Axel leads Merick to the dance floor.

“Wanna dance with me, Pidge?” He kisses her forehead, and she melts into him. I am so happy for her and man does she look gorgeous. Sammi has always been beautiful, but no one ever saw that except Maddox and me. Everyone else saw her weight, but we saw past that, we saw her heart.

I was worried about leaving her when I went off to college, but Maddox is taking care of her. I knew he would, but it's still scary to think we almost lost her. She's gained back most of the weight from before she was sick. I know she struggles daily, but I also know Maddox is there every step of the way, helping her to love herself and he's showing her he loves her just the way she is.



Chapter Twenty-Five

LAWSON

I didn't hear a word the preacher said, or the vows Merick and Axel made to each other. The only thing that existed was Brin standing across from me in the simple silk silver dress with a slit up to her hip. She would glance at me every now and then with the slightest smile and tears glittering in her emerald eyes.

The wedding was small yet perfect for Axel and Merick. Axel's family ranch was turned into a garden of white flowers and twinkling fairy lights. Brin and the other girls gushed about how beautiful and romantic it was after the sun went down.

Once the wedding was over everyone moved to the tent where tables were set up for the reception. Axel and Merick's first dance was to David J's song "Before You".

It was almost time for Merick to toss the bouquet, I saw Maddox quietly talking to her and didn't think anything of it. But then...instead of tossing it she handed it to a confused Sammi. Maddox dropped to one knee right behind her and when she spun around, he popped the question. I guess we'll

be coming back for another wedding when they set a date. It really shouldn't have been a surprise, they have almost as much history as me and Brin do. Their story wasn't easy to get to where they are now, especially for Sammi, but she's stronger than anyone ever gave her credit for.

Merick and Axel have plans of leaving to go travel and see where they end up after we head back to Harbor. Since we're all together again it wouldn't have felt right if we didn't come to The Coves before going our separate ways again.

The girls are huddled in a circle with drinks in their hands. As I'm walking up, I hear Brin. "I wish we could stay and never go back." My brows dip low in confusion, why wouldn't she want to go back? I thought everything had been great with us. I was worried about how she would act toward me while here, but she's no different. Is it because of me or is it because she misses our friends, her grandparents, and home?

"What happened?" Merick and Sammi ask. Merick adds, "I thought you liked it in Massachusetts and now with Lawson..." Her words trail off.

"I do and it's great with Lawson. It's just that my last shift before coming here, Dean, my fucking boss, confessed he has feelings for me. He told me I deserve so much better than Lawson." What the fuck?

"Oh my God! Have you told Lawson?"

"No! He would blow a fuse and go after him again."

"What did you say?"

“He told me not to give him an answer. That we would talk about it when I got back.”

I round the corner of rocks. Grabbing Brin’s arm, I pull her behind me until we’re by the water. “Lawson, what are you doing?”

Letting go of her arm, I spin, facing her. My gut feels like it’s been filled with lead and my heart hammers in my chest. “What are you going to tell him, Brin? Why wouldn’t you tell him that you don’t want him? Right then and there, why wouldn’t you tell him to fuck off?”

“Lawson.”

I snort, my tone mixed with sarcasm and venom. “That’s right because this shit between us was just some fucking fun for the time being. You’re keeping him on standby for when you’re done with me. You playing me, Brin?”

Her fists clench at her sides. She screams at me, “I’m not playing you!”

My voice lowers as an abundance of emotion overwhelms me. My throat prickles with the coming tears I can’t hold back. “Then what the fuck are you doing? Because this isn’t fun for me anymore. My head is telling me this isn’t fun and my heart sure as hell is saying this isn’t fucking fun.” I drop to my knees and hold my arms out to my sides. “I’m yours, Pretty Girl. I’m fucking yours.”

She glances at our friends that have circled around us. The girls nodding their heads, some with smiles, some with hands

covering their mouths. “Do you remember when I told you, you weren’t going to run my life?”

I nod, not sure where she’s going with that. “Yes.”

“What did you tell me after that?”

“I told you I didn’t want to run your life I was going to ruin it.”

“You did just that, Law, you ruined my life and me. When you’re away from me you’re all I think about. When I’m with you I feel complete. I’m yours too. I have always been yours.”

I blink rapidly still processing what she just confessed. My arms drop to my sides. “But you didn’t tell him to fuck off.”

She smiles, shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “I was going to as soon as we got back. I was going to find a new job. I’ve saved the money you and Fisher won’t take. I already told Kenzi and Fisher that I was done working there.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me how you felt?”

“I was going to tell you when we got back that I quit. As for my feelings, for a while, I was trying to work them out and I was scared. But once I knew without a doubt, I was waiting until we were here to tell you. I was going to tell you tonight before we left The Coves. Your eavesdropping ruined my moment.” She rests her fists on her hips and arches her brow. “Can you get up now before you start thinking it would be a good idea to propose too? You have at least four years before I say yes.”

I stand up, wiping the sand off my jeans, then I freeze. Her words sink in and I register what she just said. “Four years? Wait, what? You want to marry me? Is that what you’re telling me?”

She grins while shaking her head. I’m clearly in shock and not processing as fast as I should be. I’ve been worried about losing her all this time, now she tells me she’s mine and in the same breath says she’s going to marry me. I would marry her tomorrow if that’s what she wants.

“Someday, yes, I want to marry you, but not today and not anytime soon. I love you, Law. You’re the boy in the dinosaur shirt at six years old that stole my heart. You never gave it back and you never will because it belongs to you.”

“You love me, Pretty Girl?” I blink rapidly, there’s those fucking tears again. I bite down on my bottom lip. I’m not an emotional guy, but fuck if this girl doesn’t fuck with my head and make me feel every goddamn thing.

She repeats those three words I’ve waited so long to hear. “I love you, Law.”

“I love you, too. So fucking much.” My arms encase her as I pick Brin up out of the sand. Her legs automatically wrap around my waist. Our mouths crash together as our friends clap and cheer. “I owe you something.”

She looks thoroughly confused when she’s back on her feet. “You don’t owe me anything. What are you talking about?”

“Turn the music up.” Taking Brin’s hand in mine, I spin her around. “I owe you the dance we didn’t get at prom.” “Better” by SYML blares through the speakers of Axel’s truck.

Tugging her closer, her arms envelope my neck. “You looked so good in your tux. I wanted to rip out every girl’s eyes that looked at you.”

Our friends slow dance around us while the bonfire burns in the distance. This is how it should have always been.

I chuckle at her jealousy that matches my own. I guess I should tell her the truth of why no one danced with her that night. “I told everyone if they tried to dance with you, I would break their legs.”

“Jesus, we really are toxic as fuck.”

My hand tangles in her hair. Pulling her head back, I bring my lips to meet hers. I murmur, “I wouldn’t want it with anyone else.”

“Me either.”



Chapter Twenty-Six

LAWSON

There's a knock on the front door. Thinking it's Toby coming over to see Kenzi, I open it without checking to see who it is. My eyes widen in shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you going to let me in?" Dad huffs in his you're wasting my time sort of way. "Your mother sent me here to talk to you."

Opening the door wider, I let him inside. There's no hiding the fact that Brin's living here now. I'm sure as hell not going to tell her to leave.

He steps inside, seeing Kenzi and Fisher on the couch. "Fisher."

Fisher rubs the back of his neck and chuckles awkwardly. "Hey, Mr. Beck."

"Who was knocking?" Brin comes out of the hallway freezing when her eyes fall on him.

"Brinley?" Dad's eyes drift between the two of us.

“Hi, Brad or Mr. Beck,” she squeaks timidly. “I’m not really sure what to call you.”

I see the pain in his eyes when he looks at her. She used to be his stepdaughter and no matter what happened with our parents, he loved Brin, and he loved her mom more than he ever loved mine. But love came second to his love of money. He had no problem kicking them out onto the streets for the right price tag. Money and my mom turned him into the evil bastard he is today.

“You’re all grown up.” He hasn’t spoken to her since that day, I’m not going to let him come in here and try to fuck with her head. He has an agenda and I want to know what it is, so I can tell him no and he can leave.

“What do you want, Dad?”

His attention focuses on me. “Your mother told me to come here and see what is going on with you. I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure out why you wouldn’t hop on the deal to transfer.”

“Transfer?” Fisher butts in.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Your dream has always been to play football and you love it.” His lip turns up in disgust. “But there has always been something or should I say someone that you loved more. Are you really going to give up your dreams for a girl? The same girl that was your stepsister?”

Stepping behind Brin, I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her back against me. “That’s what you don’t understand, Dad, what you’ve never understood. Brin isn’t just some girl. You ripped her away from me once, but you won’t do it again. My dreams don’t exist without her. I will walk away from everything, football, you, Mom, every-fucking-thing before I let you come between us again.”

His eyes drift to Brin. “How much?”

“Excuse me?”

“How much will it take for you to walk away?”

She jerks my arm off of her and stands toe to toe with him. “You’re seriously trying to pay me to leave your son? I don’t need your money and you sure as hell are not going to come in here and try to buy me like I’m some kind of cheap whore. Maybe that’s what you thought of my mother, but I’m nothing like her.” Brin shakes her head. “You are not the same man I remember, Mr. Beck.” She steps beside me. Taking my hand, she laces our fingers together. “I love Lawson and there’s no amount of money that could change that.”

“Come in here?” He scoffs. “You mean to the apartment that I pay for?”

Fisher stands at my other side and crosses his arms over his chest. “That you pay half for. My parents pay the other half.”

“It’s not you paying, it’s Mom.”

“What do you think she will say when I tell her who you’re playing house with?”

Brin looks up at me, her gaze pleading. “Lawson, I have enough money for us to continue living here. Please don’t leave me again. Don’t transfer. Stay here with me.”

My thumb brushes across her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere, Pretty Girl. Ever.” I kiss her forehead. “You heard her, Dad. I don’t need you, so get the fuck out and don’t come back. You might be my father, but if you ever disrespect her again, I will gut you like a fucking fish.”

Kenzi opens the front door. “You heard him. Get the fuck out! No one disrespects B, you soul sucking serpent. Go live a miserable life with the money you love so much.”

He gives me one last glance. “You’re going to regret this.”

“The only thing I’m ever going to regret is not standing up to you sooner.”

Kenzi slams the door closed as soon as he walks out.

“B, you okay?” Kenzi pulls her into a hug.

“I’m okay.” She takes a deep breath. “I love you, Law.”

“I love you too, Brin.” She lays her forehead against my chest and grips my sides. “We got this.”

Cupping her cheeks, I lift her face, making her look at me. Like a magnet my lips are drawn to hers. “We got this.” I repeat her words before kissing her breathlessly.



It's the start of the third quarter and Alabama is winning by two touchdowns. What the fuck is happening? Our team acts like they don't know what the fuck they're doing out there. Kendrick is choking under the pressure and he's missing plays. I don't get it. He's not a great person, but he is a great QB, can he not keep his head together when the other team is winning or is he just intimidated by this team? How the fuck is he a first-round pick in the draft? You have to be at the top of your game in any situation, but he isn't.

Coach throws his clipboard onto the grass when Kendrick chooses to run our Scoop 09 play instead of the Fire 45 play Coach insisted on. The ball snaps back, Kendrick fakes the pass and shuffles, looking for an opening.

I spot Gentry, but there's no way he'll catch it. He's too far down field. Kendrick tries to run, but two of Alabama's linebackers barrel into him, they came from both sides. All three tumble to the ground, but Kendrick's leg is positioned oddly. Number 41 jumps up unharmed and so does number 12, but Kendrick doesn't. He's writhing in pain while holding his leg. Son of a bitch! He's hurt. Coach Patterson and Anderson run out onto the field as medics check him over. My chest pounds furiously while waiting to see if Kendrick is okay. I send up a silent prayer asking for him to be fine. No matter how I may feel about Kendrick, we're still teammates. Out on the field we're a family.

They load him onto the stretcher and push him off the field. Coach jogs to the sideline. "Beck, you're in."

“Is he okay?” I ask while pushing my helmet on.

“We don’t know yet. They’re going to check him out. We should know something soon. Bring the win home. Seen 99, got it?”

“Got it, Coach.”

I run out onto the field, we huddle as a team, and I give the play. Everything happens in slow motion except for the pounding pulse and blood rushing in my ears. My thundering heart could pound right out of my chest. This is my moment and one I will never forget.

I catch the snap and look for my opening. I find Williams exactly where I need him, I take a few steps back then pivot. I throw the ball with everything I have in me. The pass is complete!

Williams runs, leaving everyone in his dust, I count down the yard lines until he reaches the end zone. “Yes!” I roar with my arms in the air before walking back to Coach.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Coach laughs and slaps me on the back. “One more touchdown and it’s a tied game.”

“I got this, Coach!”

“I know you do. When you go back out there, play your heart out, Beck.”

I get what he’s saying, this is my time to shine, and I’ll never have this first time feeling again in college. Next up NFL, Baby!

When the clock runs out and the buzzer sounds, I fall to my knees. We won! Our team won by seven points. I brought the win home!



Chapter Twenty-Seven

BRINLEY

Tonight was supposed to be my first night back to work. Dean called numerous times, but I ignored his calls. I'm nervous to walk into the café and return my uniform. I don't want to deal with the confrontation that I know is bound to happen, but it's inevitable.

Pushing the door open, I step inside the café. "If You Met Me First" by Eric Ethridge plays throughout the building. Who's working? No one is at the counter or cleaning tables. I waited until the last minute before closing, so I could hurry and escape without seeing Dean. I lay my shirts on the counter and start to walk out when I hear him call my name. "Brinley?"

"I have to go, Dean."

"Please give me an explanation. You owe me that much."

He's right. The least I can do is explain. I glance back at the door while walking toward the counter. "I can't work here anymore. I'm sorry I didn't give you notice."

He throws the papers he was holding onto the counter. His jaw twitches and nostrils flare. “Why can’t you work here anymore? Is it because of him?” Moving around the counter, Dean turns the open sign off and locks the door.

I don’t think too much about it, because it is closing time and he doesn’t want any more customers coming in. I just need to turn the lock to let myself out. “No. It just started to feel uncomfortable working here. I wasn’t comfortable.”

“You weren’t comfortable?” He scoffs. “Were you comfortable in my car? Were you comfortable going to dinner with me? You sure seemed to be comfortable when you were flirting with me. Now all of sudden you’re uncomfortable. You’re choosing him over me!”

“It was never a choice. I have loved him almost my entire life. I handed him my heart when I was six years old, and he never gave it back. I need to go.” My heartbeat kicks up a notch and my pulse begins to race. I quickly stride toward the door.

My fingers fumble with the lock. I feel a hand in my hair, and I’m yanked backwards like a rag doll. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Let go of me!” Reaching behind me, I dig my nails into his hands trying to ease his hold enough for me to escape.

White hot pain sears through my cheek from the slap of his free hand. “You stupid bitch!” Dean throws me onto the cold wooden floor.

My fight or flight instincts take over, I try to crawl toward the door as quickly as I can. With trembling legs and shaking hands, I do my best to stand up, but before I can, Dean's gripping my ankles and pulling me away from the door. I scream, "Help!" over and over, hoping someone can hear me.

Like I weigh nothing, he flips me onto my back and straddles my waist. "Shut up!" His hand rears back and I feel the stinging pain once more.

"Please stop! Let me go!" I sob hysterically and fight like hell to get him off of me. I'm so scared.

My flailing arms and kicking legs don't deter him at all. "Sluts like you think they can go around teasing me. You think you can lead me on all this time and I'm just going to let you walk away?"

"Dean, let me go! Please just let me go!" My begging and pleading and cries for help fall on deaf ears.

His hands cup my cheeks. I shake my head side to side, my hips buck, but nothing I do is helping me. "I'm taking what you owe me, you little whore." God, no! Please don't let him do this to me. "You think you can walk around here looking the way you do, tempting me, and get away with it?" I continue to fight and kick and scream with every ounce of my energy to get him off of me, but he overpowers me. The blood rushing in my ears drowns out his voice. I focus on the beats of my racing heart and begin to count.

His fingers find the button of my jeans. I turn my face toward the front door with tears sliding down my cheeks just

as the glass shatters.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

LAWSON

A sinking feeling sits heavily in the pit of my stomach. All of my calls and texts to Brin have gone unanswered since we were about thirty minutes outside of Harbor. My foot anxiously taps the bus floor. As soon as my feet hit the cement, I take off running as fast as I can.

My car idles in a parking spot in front of Washmore Café. That bad feeling sinks deeper. What I see through the glass door has my vision going red. “I’m going to fucking kill you, motherfucker!” I jerk on the handle, but the door is locked. He’s on top of Brin trying to pull her jeans down, but she’s fighting him with everything she has in her. “Keep fighting, Pretty Girl!” Her eyes collide with mine and I fucking die inside at the fear staring back at me.

Yanking my shirt over my head, I wrap it around my fist. I rear back and punch the glass with every bit of strength I possess. The glass shatters. Stepping through the broken door, I grab the neck of his shirt from the back and fling him off of her. I throw him onto his back and straddle his waist. My fists plow into his face over and over. “I told you if you ever

touched her again, I would fucking kill you!” Blood sprays out of his nose. He spits crimson and teeth until he’s no longer conscious. I don’t stop. I can’t stop. All I hear is the sound of his cracking bones and Brin yelling for me.

“Lawson!” Brin screams. She crawls to my side and lays her hands on my back. “Lawson, stop! If you kill him, you’ll be taken from me. I need you!”

Her words pull me out of my trance. Climbing off of him, I pull her into my lap. “He hurt you.” My bloody knuckles brush along the bruises coloring her cheeks.

She winces. “I’m okay.” She’s not okay. He fucking hurt her!

“The cops are on their way.” Both of us look up to see Toby.

I hold Brin closer, rocking us both and kissing the crown of her head. “I’m so fucking proud of you for fighting.”

Fear of the unknown consumes me. Are they going to arrest me and take me from her? I have a split-second thought of running, but I’m not a fucking coward. I’ll face the consequences of my actions because I was protecting her. I would sacrifice my life in order to keep her safe.

The red and blue lights flash bright, the sirens are deafening, and the three of us stand stock still while they load that fucking scumbag into an ambulance.

“I’m Officer Jones, what happened here?”

Brin speaks softly. “I was returning my uniform. Dean wanted an explanation of why I wanted to quit. I told him I no

longer felt comfortable working here. He attacked me and was going to rape me if Lawson hadn't saved me."

"You're Lawson?" Officer Jones asks.

"Yes, sir, Lawson Beck. I knew something was wrong when she wasn't answering my calls or texts. I ran from campus to here, I saw my car and when I looked through the door, I saw him on top of her. The door was locked, the only way for me to get to her was to break it."

Officer Jones looks at Toby. "You were on campus with him?"

"Yes, and he's telling the truth. I saw everything, I'm the one who called 9-1-1."

"Why were you boys on campus this late?"

I answer his question. "We're on the football team, we just got back in town from our game in Alabama."

"Ms. Ryan, why did you wait until the café was closed to bring back your uniform? If you felt uncomfortable, why would you not bring someone with you?"

I don't give Brin a chance to answer. "This isn't her fault. It shouldn't matter what time she came here or why she came alone. Was she supposed to know that he was going to assault her?"

"Try and understand that I'm just doing my job."

My brow cocks and I cross my arms over my chest. "Your job should be to protect victims, not interrogate them and

make them feel like they did something wrong.”

“Listen, Mr. Beck, I could be hauling you off to jail for assault until the man you beat wakes up or doesn’t and those assault charges turn to a murder case. The owner of this café is an upstanding citizen, and he does a lot to help our community. He owns this establishment for the college kids, such as yourself, to have a place to go. I don’t know you three from a hole in the wall. As far as I know you could be lying and actually tried to come here to rob the place. I need to ask questions to get the full picture of the events that transpired tonight, so I would appreciate it if you don’t tell me how to do my job. Right now, I am on your side, but that can quickly change.”

I inhale a deep breath of air to keep myself under control. “I’m sorry.”

“Now, Ms. Ryan, can you answer my questions?”

“I didn’t think he would be here. I thought someone else would be closing because he usually left, unless I was working. I just wanted to drop my shirts off and leave, so I never had to come back. He wouldn’t let me leave. It never crossed my mind that Dean would attack me, so I didn’t think I needed to bring someone with me.”

Officer Jones asks what feels like a million more questions before he finally lets us leave. It’s deathly quiet in the car on the way to the apartment. I don’t think any of us know what to say. I glance at Brin with her arms wrapped around herself. She said she was okay, but I know that was a lie.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

BRINLEY

The shock leaves my body only to be replaced by the reality of what happened tonight. I try to move, but I'm frozen. Lawson opens the passenger side door. He scoops me into his arms, and carries me inside the apartment. Kenzi and Fisher ask what happened with worry-induced tones. Lawson doesn't answer, he takes me to the bathroom, and sits me on the counter. I stare at the wall in a daze while he turns on the water. He tries to undress me, but I bat his hands away. "Can you go out there, please?"

The hurt and pain that flashes in his gaze breaks me. I know I'm pushing him away and shutting him out, but I can't help it. "Yeah, if that's what you want."

I slide down the shower wall, tears cascade down my cheeks as sobs rack through my body. I rest my chin on my knees, holding myself tightly. My shoulders shake from the force of my uncontrollable wailing. I told Lawson I was okay, at the time I thought I was, but I'm not. I'm far from okay. All I feel are Dean's rough hands on me, his hot musky breath on my face, the slap of his palms, and the fear I felt.

I don't know how long I've been on the shower floor, but the water turned cold a while ago. "Brin? Baby, it's time to get out. You've been in here a long time." I hear Lawson's soothing voice, but I can't respond.

All I can do is cry. I feel ashamed and embarrassed. It was my fault this happened. If I would have just listened to Lawson and quit, this never would have happened. If I wouldn't have flirted with Dean or gotten into his car, this would have never happened. If I would have taken my shirts during the day or had someone go with me, this would have never happened. Like Dean said I led him on, maybe I smiled one too many times, or gave him a sign that I wanted him sexually. There's no one to blame except me. This is all my fault and Lawson's life could have been ruined because of my actions.

I barely register Lawson drying me off or slipping a t-shirt over my head. He lifts me into his arms, carrying me out of the bathroom, he's taking me to his room. "Take me to my room, please."

Lawson's chest rises and falls heavily against me as he lays me in my bed and covers me with a blanket. "I'm here, Pretty Girl, I'll be waiting for you." He kisses my forehead, then he's gone, and I'm left with nothing but my guilty thoughts and the face of my attacker when I close my eyes.



Chapter Thirty

BRINLEY

It's been seven nights since Dean tried to rape me. Seven nights that Kenzi has held me while I scream because of the nightmares. Seven nights since I've spoken or gotten out of this bed.

It's been six days that Lawson has brought me food that I can't stomach to eat. Six days that I have wondered why it was me.



Chapter Thirty-One

LAWSON

Toby holds Kenzi between his legs, Fisher stands at one end of the island while I stand at the other. “They should be here any minute.”

I hear the knock at the door, everyone stays in the kitchen while I answer it. I have held strong since the night Brin was attacked a little over a week ago, but when I open the door, I break. I wrap my arms around Sammi and let the tears fall. “She needs you. I need you.” I repeat the words I said over the phone.

I didn’t know what else to do but get her best friend here. Taking a chance, I ordered the plane tickets in hopes that my parents hadn’t canceled my credit card. They hadn’t. Which tells me Dad didn’t tell Mom what happened when he showed up here.

Letting Sammi go, I dry my eyes with the back of my hand and latch onto Maddox. “Thanks for coming.”

“Bro, what the fuck happened?” I wouldn’t give them any information besides we needed them. I felt it was better to explain once they got here. Say the words face-to-face.

Following me to the island everyone hugs solemnly. Sitting on one of the stools, I fist strands of my hair. “When it comes to Brin, I have always known what to do, what she needed, but I’m fucking lost.”

“We all are,” Fisher adds. “We don’t know how to help her.”

Sammi’s head tilts to the side slightly, tears brimming. “Fisher, you guys are scaring me. What happened to her?”

Each of us look at each other until I say the words. “Dean tried to rape her.”

“What?” Sammi gasps, her hand covers her mouth.

“Lawson, man—“ Maddox lays his hand on my shoulder as his words die.

I angrily wipe my tears with the back of my hand. “I got him off of her and beat the fuck out of him, but she’s gone somewhere in her head. I don’t know how to bring her back.”

Fisher tells them, “She’s shut all of us out.”

“She has nightmares every night. I hold her through them, but she won’t talk to me.” Kenzi wipes her cheeks. “She hasn’t spoken in over a week, and she’s barely touched any food.”

“Okay.” Sammi paces the floor with her hands on her hips. “We’re going to get her through this. All of us are going to get her through this.” She’s quiet for several minutes while we all watch her. “Everyone needs to leave. Everyone except Kenzi.”

“Come on, we’ll go to Wiley’s.” Toby stands, releasing Kenzi. “I think we could all use a drink.” He holds his hand

out to Maddox. “I’m Toby. I’m on the team with Lawson.”

Maddox shakes his hand. “I’d say it’s nice to meet you, man, but this shit—“ His words trail off as he gets choked up. “I’m Maddox.”



“You four look like you could use these.” The old man sits the bottles of beer in front of us.

I take a long pull of the ice-cold drink. “What do we do if Sammi can’t pull her out of this?”

“Have faith, Lawson, if anyone can get her through it, it’s Pidge. You did right calling her.”

“I sure in the fuck hope so. The police act like she’s the one who did wrong.” I shake my head.

“You guys talking ‘bout that café owner?” Wiley’s gruff voice catches all of our attention. His eyes meet mine. “It was your little lady, the blonde?”

I knew people were talking around campus. I’ve heard the gossip, but how the hell does he know anything about it? “Yeah,” I answer hesitantly. “How do you know about it?”

“I’m a bartender, boy, I hear shit. Can I give you a piece of advice?”

At this point I’ll take anything I can get if it’s going to help Brin. “Sure.”

“The cops ain’t gonna help you. You’re gonna have to take matters into your own hands.”

“What do you mean?”

He reaches into the cooler and pulls out four more bottles. Popping the caps off, he sets them in front of us. “You did good beating that piece of shit, he’d be better off six feet under, but that’s not going to help your little lady. You think she’s the first?”

My stare widens in horror. “You think there’s others he did this to?”

“I think that’s what you need to figure out.”

Wiley’s words stick with me the rest of the night. When we get back to the apartment, Sammi comes out of Brin and Kenzi’s room. She doesn’t need to say what I already know; she shakes her head verifying that she didn’t get through to her yet.



Chapter Thirty-Two

LAWSON

I wait outside the science department for Rachel. The door opens and people start exiting, I keep waiting until I see the girl I recognize with long dark hair, glasses, and a piercing through her septum. “Rachel?” I call out. Her head whips in my direction. “I need to talk to you for a minute.”

“What’s up? I’m headed across campus to the art building. You can walk with me.” We set a steady pace while I try and figure out what to ask. “How’s Brinley?”

“Surviving.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

I have so many questions running through my mind. I decide on the straightforward one first. “Did Dean ever hurt you or try anything?”

Her brows crease as she shakes her head. “No, never.”

“Why did Brin work for you so much?”

She stops in her tracks and turns to me. “What? I never asked Brin to work for me.”

My brows knit in confusion. “Dean was always calling Brin and asking her to pick up shifts for you. Even on her days off he would tell her someone called in and he needed her to work.”

Her features mimic mine as we start walking again. “That doesn’t make any sense. It was job policy that if you called in you had to have your own replacement. Dean would call me and tell me I didn’t need to work because he had the shift covered.”

Son of a bitch! “He was making it where he spent more time with Brin and getting closer to her.”

She grabs the door handle to enter the art building. “Last year there was a girl that worked at the café. Her name was Lena Taylor. She quit the café and transferred, her best friend was Hailey Waters. Hailey still goes to school here, maybe talk to her.”

“Thanks, Rachel.”

“You’re welcome. If Dean did to Lena what he did to Brinley, there’s probably more girls out there. I want to see him pay. Tell Brinley I’m thinking about her.”

“I will.” Letting her go to class, I set out to find Hailey.



Hailey couldn’t tell me much except that Lena packed her stuff and left suddenly and unexpectedly. With a little digging on social media, I found out Lena is living an hour away.

“Who are you?” the blonde resembling Brin asks when she answers the door.

“My name is Lawson Beck. Are you Lena Taylor?” She crosses her arms and slightly nods. “I need to talk to you about Dean Smith.”

“You need to leave.”

She hurries to slam the door in my face, but I catch it with my hand. “Please. He assaulted my girlfriend.”

“Shit.” She takes a deep breath and slowly blows it out. “Come in.”

I sit on the black suede couch across the room where Lena’s sitting on a matching loveseat. “If you don’t mind, would you tell me what happened while you worked at Washmore Café?”

I can’t get over how much her and Brin look alike. Same blonde hair, same body shape, same height. Only difference is Lena has darker blue eyes. “Washmore Café was my first job. Dean was so nice and charming. He told me that usually I would have to wait for a call, but he liked me, and he gave me the job right there on the spot. I lived on campus, but he would say it wasn’t safe for me to be walking back to the dorms alone at night. He would walk with me and was a complete gentleman. I started working more and more because someone was always calling in and Dean was always there when I worked.”

This all sounds familiar. “Did he take you to dinner?”

She nods. “To Waterfront. That’s when I started to see the real Dean and I didn’t like it. Work became uncomfortable and I decided I was going to quit after he confessed his feelings for me. He doesn’t like to feel threatened or rejected.” Her tear-filled eyes lift to mine. “Did he rape her?” Her story is the same as Brin’s almost to a T.

I shake my head. “I stopped him before he could.”

She bites her quivering lip. “She’s lucky you were there.”

“Did he do that to you?” I can’t say the words without wanting to vomit.

She confirms with a quick nod. “In my dorm room after I rejected him. I couldn’t stay there after that, so I packed and left.”

“Why didn’t you call the police or tell anyone?”

Lena shrugs. “Shame, embarrassment. Dean made me feel like it was my fault. I didn’t think anyone would believe me.”

“I want to help Brin, but I want to help you too and any others that he did this to. Would you be willing to come to the police station in Harbor?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been back since.”

I try to reassure her. “I beat him up pretty badly. He’s in the hospital and can’t hurt you. Give me a few days and I will call you. You deserve justice, Lena. It wasn’t your fault, and you shouldn’t have to live your life in fear.”

“Thank you, Lawson. Brin is a lucky girl to have you by her side. I’ll be waiting for your call.”



I fling open the door to the police station. “Officer Jones?” I ask the first person I see. They point in the direction I need to go.

He stands up behind his desk. “Lawson Beck, what are you doing here?”

“Your job apparently.” He glances behind me to the six women I tracked down. “These six women are ready to file charges on Dean Smith for rape.”

His eyes widen. “Is this true?”

If he would have been less worried about Dean being a standup citizen, then maybe he could have stopped Dean years ago. Every year a new unsuspecting female student with blonde hair walks into Washmore Café looking for a job. She’s new to the area, a freshman at the university, and the cycle is repeated. Dean Smith is a serial rapist that took advantage of these girls, and they were too scared to speak until now. Not one of these girls had someone save them at the time, but I’m going to do everything in my power to give them the justice they deserve now.

“Yes.” A woman named Stephanie steps forward. “We’ll tell you our stories and do what needs to be done to get justice.”

“I’ll take you to an interrogation room.” I stay standing at his desk. He turns back and asks, “How is she?”

“We’re going to get her through this.” I tell him the same words Sammi spoke. He nods before opening another door leading them down their path to start healing.



Chapter Thirty-Three

BRINLEY

S ammi yanks the covers off of me. “Alright, Brin, get your ass up and out of this bed! I’ve been here a week, taking care of you and watching you self-destruct. It’s time for tough love.”

I jerk the covers back over myself. “Leave me alone!”

“I’m not going to leave you alone. You’re my best friend and I’m not going to sit here any longer and watch you bury yourself in all those negative thoughts.”

“Then go home!”

She grabs the comforter once more, I pull it back, and a tug-of-war ensues. “Brinley Renee Ryan, you have five seconds to get your ass up and in that shower, or I will drag you in there myself.”

“Why won’t you just leave me alone?” I scream at the top of my lungs.

“Because I can’t,” she hollers as tears fall. “I know what it feels like to blame yourself, tear yourself down, be ashamed, embarrassed, scared, and every other fucking emotion you can

feel. But you have to stop blaming yourself. What happened to you wasn't your fault. Stop shutting out everyone who loves you."

Tears race down my cheeks. "If I would have just listened to Lawson none of it would have happened. I can't look at him, Sammi. Maybe he would be better off finding someone else."

"Brin." Her voice softens as she sits beside me. "You don't mean that. He loves you and he's never going to stop. He's not the only one who loves you and is scared to death right now. Kenzi, Fisher, Toby, Maddox, me. We all love you and are terrified that we're losing you."

"I'm sorry!" I wail into my cupped hands.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. We just want to see you get better. You can find a counselor that you feel comfortable with and talk to them. You need help to deal with what happened to you."

"I know." Looking down at the blanket sitting between us, I twist the material with my fidgeting fingers. "How can Lawson look at me the same when he saw Dean on top of me trying to rape me? How could he possibly still want me after that?"

Her hands cradle my cheeks, lifting my watery gaze to hers. "You think Lawson wouldn't want you now? You think his love for you went away over something that wasn't your fault? You have no idea what this has done to him, Brin. He's terrified because you won't talk to him, you won't look at him, you won't get out of this godforsaken bed. You have

completely shut him out and he doesn't know what to do. You're letting your attacker win, Brin. Do you want him to win and have that power over you?"

I shake my head frantically. No."

Sammi grins. "Then take your life back. Start by answering this, do you love Lawson? Like truly love him?"

"Of course, I do."

"Do you want to let him go?"

"No!"

"Then get up and go to him. Talk to him and together figure out how to start helping you process what happened. Shower first, I already have clothes in the bathroom for you."

My arms fly around her neck, and I squeeze tightly. "Thank you."

"I love you, Brin."

"I love you too."



I stand at the railing wearing his extra jersey. I missed most of the game, but I made it with a couple of minutes left. Everyone else was already here and up in their seats somewhere. I wanted to make sure Lawson saw me.

It's the last play of the game and the score is tied. If his team doesn't get this, they go into overtime. They're within inches of the end zone. Lawson catches the snap and fakes a

pass. No one is open for him to throw. The stadium is so quiet waiting to see what he's going to do. Lawson doesn't choke under pressure, he finds a way out.

There's a hole open between players. I see it and the moment he notices it he shoves his way through. The referee's arms fly up indicating it was a touchdown.

The crowd goes crazy as the buzzer blares. "Yes!" I scream louder than everyone. I take Sammi's hand in mine as we both jump up and down excitedly. Lawson's team surrounds him, cheering and celebrating their win. He continues walking, his eyes scanning the crowd. He used to do that when we were younger; at every game, he would look for me. He still does that? My heart rate spikes and those butterflies I haven't felt in over two weeks are back with a vengeance.

The moment he sees me, he rips off his helmet and runs to the rail, jumping over it like he's an acrobat. With one arm, he lifts me off the ground, my legs lock around his waist. "You're here."

I nod with pooling tears. "I'm here. I'm sorry."

"Never be sorry, Pretty Girl." His lips crash against mine, devouring my mouth. My body ignites for him. I'm going to be okay.

Cradling his jaw, I break our kiss. "I love you, Law."

He closes his eyes and sighs heavily. "You have no idea how good it feels to hear those words again. I love you too, Brin, so fucking much. I have a press conference and then

we'll go home." He kisses me once more; pride shines in his beautiful blue eyes. "I'm so fucking proud of you. We're going to get you through this, okay?"

I nod with a smile. "Okay." Since Trevor Kendrick tore his ACL, he's done for the season which puts Lawson as the starting quarterback. It was Trevor's last year playing college, so I don't know if he will still be able to be drafted in a year or however long it takes for him to heal.

"Fuck, I missed you so goddamn much!"

"I missed you too." I slap his arm playfully. "Go do your football stuff."

Kenzi, Fisher, and Maddox join us. "Don't leave her alone." Lawson doesn't need to wait for a reply, he knows I'm safe with them. I watch him jump back over the rail and run to his team.

Fisher is the first to hug me. "Don't ever scare me like that again!"

"Look at your beautiful face, B!" Kenzi takes me from Fisher.

I turn to Maddox. I've only ever seen him emotional when it comes to Sammi, but I see it in his eyes. "Always trust him, Brin."

I nod and wrap my arms around his waist. "Thank you for bringing her to me and thank you for loving her."

He hugs me in a brotherly way. "Loving her is easy. Worrying about all you girls is fucking hard."



That night Lawson and I stayed up talking all night long, a few days later Sammi and Maddox flew back to Cape Cove. Lawson and I aren't where we were before the assault, but we're getting there. We haven't moved past kissing because Lawson wants to go slow. He's not going to pressure me into anything I'm not ready for. His gentleness with me through all of this makes me love him so much more.

"Brin?" Lawson opens my bedroom door. "We need to go somewhere."

"Okay." My brows dip in confusion. "Where?"

"Trust me, Pretty Girl," he states, giving me nothing else.

I do without a doubt and that's why I follow him out to his car.

We pull into a parking spot at what looks to be a gym. "What are we doing here?" I didn't wear proper clothing to work out.

"Come on." I follow Lawson inside. "We're the first ones here."

I look around the empty gym. "Are they even open?"

"Not technically."

My eyes widen. "Please tell me we didn't just commit breaking and entering?"

“No.” He laughs as the door opens. Six blondes walk in with beaming smiles.

“Hey, Lawson,” they singsong in unison.

My hands fly to my hips as I glare at him. That green monster called jealousy rears its ugly head. “What the hell is this? You better start explaining right now!” What exactly was he up to when I couldn’t pull myself out of bed?

He sucks his lips in to keep his smile at bay. “Calm down.” He points to each girl. “Lena, Stephanie, Carrie, Melissa, Anna, and Natalie. This is Brin.”

The girl named Lena says, “It’s so good to finally meet you.”

Carrie adds, “We’ve heard so much about you.”

Snapping my head in Lawson’s direction, my brow quirks. “You’ve talked to them about me?” Turning back to them, I scoff, “He hasn’t told me a thing about any of you.”

Lawson’s arm encloses around my shoulders. My back meets his front. “They know what you mean to me, Pretty Girl.” That eases some of my growing anger, but still doesn’t explain how he knows them or what they are doing here.

“We do,” Stephanie states. “Lawson tracked all of us down and brought us all together. We’re Dean survivors.”

My throat constricts. “All of you?” My hand covers my mouth.

“All of us,” Melissa confirms. Oh my God! “Because of Lawson, each of us have pressed charges against Dean. He’ll be going to prison for many many years.”

Peering up at him, I ask, “You did all of that?”

His fingers rake through my hair. “I wanted to find a way to help you. I wanted you to know you aren’t alone. Each of you have your own story and I wanted you all to have a safe space to be able to talk to each other.”

Tears pool in my eyes and I sniffle. “Thank you.”

His lips press against my forehead. “There’s someone else I want you to meet. Who I want all of you to meet. Justine,” Lawson hollers loudly. A red-haired girl with arms covered in ink runs into the room.

“Hey, Lawson.”

“Hey.” He introduces all of us. “Justine owns this gym and is shutting it down for a few hours once a week for all of you to come here and talk. She’s also offering you self-defense classes free of charge if you’re interested.”

“Hell yeah!” the other girls squeal excitedly.

I’m overwhelmed by all of this and the fact he did it all for me and for them when he didn’t even know them. That shows Lawson’s heart is bigger than even I knew it to be. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Pretty Girl. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“You’re leaving?”

“This is for you.” His lips lightly touch mine before he walks away.

He is giving me a way to heal just like he’s doing for them. I didn’t think I could love Lawson any more, but he just proved me wrong.



Epilogue

LAWSON

Five months later

I lean against the wall waiting for Brin to finish the meeting with her advisor. The door opens and a smiling Brin runs into my outstretched arms. “How’d it go?”

“Good. My classes are worked out for next fall, and I will be working on getting my master’s degree in counseling.”

“I’m so fucking proud of you.” My lips mold to hers. The last five months have been full of ups and downs. Some days are great for her, others are horrible. We work through it together and she doesn’t shut me out. Some days she still blames herself and others she’s angry. I stay by her side and encourage her to feel whatever she’s feeling, but I make sure to remind her that none of it was her fault.

She still goes every week to Justine’s gym with the others and they talk. It’s helping her work through everything, but it’s still hard for her at times. After they talk, they do their self-defense class. Brin comes home, shows me her new moves and kicks my ass which ultimately leads to us in bed and me showing her what a good girl she is.

“You ready to go home for the summer, Pretty Girl?” My arm hangs over her shoulder while we begin to walk out of the administration building.

Lifting her hand, she intertwines our fingers and kisses my hand. “So ready.”

Fisher's patiently waiting by my car to ride back with us. I can't believe he's only coming home for two weeks before driving Brin's car back to Harbor.

Watching Brin and Kenzi say goodbye yesterday you'd think they were never going to see each other again with all the hugging and crying they did. Brin is going to miss Kenzi a lot this summer while she's home in Tennessee and we're in California. I can already see it now; they're going to be talking for hours on the phone.

"Let's go, lovebirds." Fisher taps his wrist like he's wearing a watch.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Fisher gets in the back, and Brin takes passenger. My hand lays on her thigh as I leave campus.

As I hit the highway, I think about our past and what the future holds for us. Brin was there the day I held my first football jersey. She was there the day I played for the first time. She was there to watch me win the championship game at the end of this season. She will be there the day I'm drafted into the NFL, the day I play my first pro game, and she'll be there the day I hang up my jersey for the last time.

In return I will be there for Brin through every obstacle. I will be there to protect her and keep her safe, I will be there to love her and care for her and give her everything her heart desires. Brin and I might have a lifetime of history already, but our life together is just beginning.

One day I will be there to watch her walk down that aisle toward me. That will be the day I can say I won the greatest gift of my life.

The End

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About the Author

Harper Monroe is a new Indie Author with *Rebel's Love* being her first published novel. She will be writing in the genres of bully romance and enemies to lovers.

She resides in Kansas with her husband, kids, and their pug. After a long day at work, Harper likes to watch Netflix or read a book when she can. Her and her son are obsessed with *Stranger Things*.

Her guilty pleasure is watching teen drama shows while eating sour candy and drinking Pepsi.