



Whirlwind

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: Is it reckless for a master's student to blur the lines with her hot, older professor—a legendary storm chaser?

Without a doubt.

But when a tornado strikes during Finley and Professor West's first chase together, something far more dangerous than the storm pulls them in. Boundaries shatter, and so do their reservations.

Now, as they tear across Oklahoma with his famous storm chasing team, he's adamant: they crossed a line that should never have been crossed. He's her professor, and she's his student—nothing more.

But with every storm they face, they're drawn deeper into a whirlwind that threatens to consume them both.

Can they remain professional?

Or will the storms consume them?

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Chapter one

Ryker

Romantic, sexual, or other intimate relationships between faculty and students are prohibited whenever a power imbalance exists, including, but not limited to, situations where the faculty member:

Teaches, supervises, or advises the student.

Evaluates the student's academic work, research, or performance.

Holds any position of authority that may impact the student's academic, financial, or professional standing.

The HR policy for Midland Springs University, my employer for the last four years, replays in my mind for the millionth time. I've taken to reciting it to myself on loop over the last hour and a half, but no matter how many times I do, every time Finley Buckley looks up at me from her final with those pretty brown eyes of hers, my heart beats faster in my chest, and thoughts of being decent exit my brain like a lawn chair being sucked up in a twister.

Said eyes meet mine from a desk in the front row, and only when her cheeks flush pink do I realize I've been staring at her. Smooth, Ryker. Fucking smooth.

My lips turn up in a friendly smile so I don't look guilty if any students are watching the interaction, then I glance back down at my laptop. Radar for a nearby storm cell is

on it, a storm I'm debating chasing solo after this final has ended, but I'm not paying attention to it like I should. Instead, I'm thinking about Finley.

I glance up over the top of my laptop and catch her still watching me. When our eyes meet, she quickly drops her gaze to her test, her cheeks turning an even deeper pink.

Goddammit to hell. I shift in my chair and will my body to calm down. We're not alone. There are twenty-four other people in this class, and none of them can know that I have a crush—albeit an unfulfilled one—on my best student. If they did, they'd question not only her grades and all the time we've spent together during labs and office hours but also her coveted spot—one she earned fair and square—on my storm-chasing team's potentially historic chase in Oklahoma this weekend. One the school's meteorology department funded because of the research paper we'll be submitting if all goes according to plan.

I run my hands through my textured dark hair. It's longer than I usually keep it, but I see the way Finley looks at it. How her eyes linger on my hands and forearms as I do exactly what I'm doing right now. The fact I haven't gone to a barber in months is something Hawk, my best friend and fellow storm chaser on my team, Tempest Trackers, pointed out recently.

I told him that he was misreading things, but he used it as an opportunity to once again warn me I was getting too close to my student. Something he's been doing since the first time I ever told him about Finley.

It feels like yesterday, yet an entire school year has come and gone since the day she walked into my classroom. She immediately drew me in with her smarts, wit, attentiveness, and of course, her undeniable beauty.

When I'd met Hawk for dinner that night after class had ended, I told him about her—leaving out the part about how I found her straight chestnut hair, soulful eyes

that reminded me of dark amber, and round body more attractive than I've ever found anyone. But he called my starry-eyed ass out immediately, anyway.

I assured him my interest and clear excitement was only because she reminded me of myself when I was her age and working toward my master's while chasing storms, but I knew even then I was lying to myself. He knew, too—that's why he called me on my bullshit, warning me to steer clear. I told him I would.

Fuck if I didn't try.

But as the months went on, it became more and more difficult because I got to know her. She's brilliant and funny and a talented photographer. Hawk was right to warn me, but he has never met her, either.

I have, however, remained professional, never crossing a line into the territory I dreamed of exploring. Not because I didn't think Finley wanted to—I'd be an idiot to not see the mutual attraction in her eyes when she looks at me—but because I didn't want to turn our lives upside down. Especially hers.

While Finley is an adult, the small Kansas town this college is in would have a field day if they found out a forty-two-year-old professor fell for his twenty-five-year-old student.

I close my eyes and inhale a breath. I need to get my shit together before our chase tomorrow. We're going to be in a car together, spending countless hours in each other's space. I can't be thinking of her in any other way besides Ms. Buckley. My student. My off-limits student.

Romantic, sexual, or other intimate relationships between faculty and students are prohibited...

A shadow over my computer stops my mental recitation. When I look up, Finley is there like a ray of sunny light in the dreary lecture hall. She tucks a strand of silky-looking hair behind her ear then hikes the slipping strap of her backpack up her shoulder.

“Finished?” I ask quietly.

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She bites the corner of her lip. “Yep.” She holds out her test packet and Scantron to me. Normally, we do everything online, but for finals, I like to go a little more old school. Something my class groaned about—except for Finley, who simply smirked as if she knew I would do something like this. I hadn’t told her, but maybe she knows me that well.

Fuck, this weekend will be torture. A nice torture, but torture nonetheless. It’s going to be interesting being just Ryker with her outside of school, the over-the-top storm chaser and extreme meteorologist. But now that I think about it, maybe I’ve been him more than I care to admit during office hours and labs, telling jokes and laughing with her. Showing her my true self.

A man my chase team describes as an extrovert with an adrenaline addiction yet somehow has no issue calling it a night by nine on a weekday, reminiscing about the “good ol’ days,” and blasting what they’ve dubbed “mullet rock” on every chase. That’s probably why Finley didn’t flinch at the Scantron—she knows things about me that only close friends should. She knows I like to mix things up and throw in old-school surprises now and then.

I quietly clear my throat and take the test from her, careful to avoid touching her. The last thing I need is to feel her soft skin on mine, making me get swept up in my thoughts of her more than I already am.

“Thank you,” I say.

She smiles wider at me and hikes her backpack up again. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“You bet.” If I could, I’d slap my hand on my forehead. You bet? Again, fucking smooth.

Her eyes twinkle with amusement, and she dips her chin in acknowledgment. “Bye, Professor West.” Finley walks away, exiting the classroom. I force myself not to watch her ass as she leaves, an ass that’s round and framed in a pair of painted-on jeans.

I suck in a shallow breath to not draw attention to myself and put my focus back on the radar. The storm cell is looking good, and if the rest of the students finish soon, I’ll be able to catch it.

I exhale, feeling a little calmer now for two reasons: one, that Finley is gone and I can think with my professor brain, and two, the idea of letting off some steam in a solo chase. Hopefully, catching a storm will settle me enough before tomorrow, and I’ll be able to get through this weekend without embarrassing myself.

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Yes, Ryker, remember that. Prohibited.

Chapter two

Finley

I hold my phone to my ear—my cousin Jake’s on the other end—as I stare at the wind chime blowing in the breeze outside of the science building. The metal clangs together to create a symphony of tinkling and jingling. It’s a song I’ve come to associate with a shift in the weather—and a warning.

My hand grips the arm of the bench I'm sitting on, a nervous excitement sparking in my stomach. I've been watching a cluster of storms on the radar app on my phone, one the Storm Prediction Center issued a moderate risk for, with a fifteen-percent chance of tornadoes and a hatched area indicating a ten-percent probability of significant tornadoes—EF2 or stronger—within twenty-five miles of any point. It's east of the school, making it a forty-minute drive to intercept—a storm I could chase on my own, no problem. The only issue is that I need to pack before I leave tomorrow for Oklahoma, but I bet I could get some fantastic shots—

“Are you there, Fin?” Jake's voice calls through the phone.

I blink, bringing myself out of my thoughts and back to the present moment. “Yeah, sorry.”

My cousin sighs. Since I go to school in Kansas and he lives in a small town in Texas, we hardly ever see each other except for on Christmas, when I make the trip with my dad to see him and my uncle. That's why we have our weekly check-ins.

“Where's your head at?”

I want to say something along the lines of “Where's yours?” because I know his head is somewhere else, too. He's zoned out a few times during our conversation. But I know his answer, even if he won't say it.

He's tired and overworked. Partly because my uncle's bar, Night Hawk—which Jake runs—is booming due to Jake's genius marketing on social media, but also because my uncle hasn't been doing well health-wise.

“Just thinking about storms,” I say. “I leave tomorrow for that storm chase I told you about.”

“Oh, shit, Fin! That’s huge. I’m an asshole cousin for forgetting.”

“It’s fine. I told you it could happen, not that it was. But this weekend, the tornado outbreaks are supposed to be record-breaking in Oklahoma, so the chase was only confirmed the other day. And you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

He sighs. “Still. I can’t believe I forgot. This is your first professional one, right?”

“Yep. Since the school’s meteorology department is funding this particular chase, my professor was able to pick a student to come along with his team for the long weekend. We’ve got a powerful low-pressure system coming in that’s going to combine with moist and unstable air—it should be an insane weekend. And if we collect good data from any tornadoes we intercept, I’ll get my name on the scientific paper we submit. I’d tell you more, but it would get boring.”

He laughs. “I’ll admit, I only understood part of what you said, but hell yeah! That’s amazing.”

I smile at Jake’s giddiness. “Thanks. I’m excited about it.”

“You promise you’ll be careful?”

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“Yeah, yeah. You sound like my dad.”

“We care about you, Fin. We don’t want you to get sucked up by some tornado.”

I hold my breath, wondering if I should tell him the next part. But I know I’m going to, because for as long as I can remember, Jake and I tell each other nearly everything. He may be my cousin, but he’s also my best friend.

“Well, you see...” I take a big inhale.

“Finley,” Jake admonishes.

“The main reason for this chase is to collect data with rockets from inside a tornado.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

I pause briefly to make sure I word this in a way that will help him freak out less before continuing. “While the special rockets we’re using are launched into the inflow band, we’ll also be gathering data from inside the tornado as well by...well, actually being in the tornado.”

“Fin—”

“Before you completely go ballistic, we’ll be in a special vehicle that was built for this purpose. They call it Thor. The team has used it before to intercept other tornadoes, and they’ve lived to tell the tale. I’ll send you a picture of it. It’s safe.”

“I call bullshit.”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. “Okay, as safe as it can be. But they’ve never lost a chaser, not in the twenty years Ryker—Professor West—has been doing it.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line, and I think I lost connection. Then I hear the intake of his breath. “Ryker, huh?” he asks, his tone implying what he’s thinking.

My cheeks heat, and my hand tightens around the phone. It’s not uncommon for people to call their professors by their first names, I know that, but Jake and I are from small towns and families that address people of authority and strangers by Sir and Ma’am—sometimes even when we have a close relationship with them. I was hoping my cousin wouldn’t point out my slipup, but I should’ve known he would.

“It’s not like that, Jake. He’s my professor. And you know I’ve been watching him chase storms on social media since I was a teenager. It was an accident.”

“Then why didn’t you call him ‘The Twister Tamer’ like you did when you were sixteen?”

That makes me flush harder, embarrassed about how much of a fangirl I was back then—and if I’m being honest, still am. It’s hard not to be when he’s the best of the best: “The Twister Tamer” as the internet calls him. He’s not hard on the eyes, either. He’s also funny, charming, tall...

I shake my head and clear my thoughts that obviously go rogue when I think of Ryker and instead allow annoyance to settle in my stomach from being called out by my cousin. “Please don’t go all brother bear on me now,” I say.

“I’m not. This is me being your friend. A friend who wants to know why you call

your professor by his first name.”

Said annoyance rises at Jake and his dang spidey-sense—and at myself for being so obvious about my inappropriate feelings toward Ryker, even though we’ve kept things professional all year. Well, mostly professional. Maybe a little too flirty at times.

Okay, maybe a lot too flirty.

My shoulders slump. “I told you. It was an accidental slipup.”

“Finley,” he chides. “Be honest with me.”

“I am.”

“You’re not.”

The annoyance turns into fear, and I snap. “Says the man who won’t be honest about how much it hurt you that Blake dated Gavin instead of you.”

There’s a heavy pause before his deep voice comes over the line. “Ouch, Fin.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, angry at myself for saying that. His high school crush choosing one of his best friends over him is still fresh and painful. Even if he denies it, I know it is.

“I’m sorry, that was screwed up. It’s no excuse for what I said, but I think the nerves of going on such a big chase tomorrow are getting to me a bit.” Which is true. Even though I’m mostly excited, I’m nervous, too. He’s also hitting too close to home with the Ryker questions, but I won’t admit that.

“Why are you nervous?” he asks.

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I pick at the fabric of my jeans. “I want to do well and prove I can be a good asset. If the rocket launch is successful, Ry—Professor West should be able to expand his team and get more funding from the school for future research. I could maybe even get a permanent spot after I graduate with my master’s next school year.”

There’s a beat of silence. “Just tell me you’re being smart and safe.”

“Ew, Jake. What the hell?”

He barks a laugh then gags through the phone. “Gross, Fin. I didn’t mean it like that.”

I screw up my nose. “Then how did you mean it?”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble with your school if there is something going on between you two.”

My skin flames at my awkward misunderstanding, and I start to sweat. Crap, now Jake is definitely thinking that something untoward is going on with me and Ryker—and that’s definitely my fault.

I sit straighter on the bench and shift my shoulders back. “Nothing is going on. Professor West is just that: my professor.”

“That sounded like you were trying to convince yourself.”

I groan, tilting my head toward the sky. I hate that my cousin can see right through me, even over the phone. Because while Ryker and I have only flirted, I can’t deny

there's an attraction there, one that I know we can't act on. Because not only is he my professor, he's also seventeen years older than me and a man I hope to work with one day beyond this weekend's chase. That means we must remain professional.

Nothing can happen.

"Jake, please, let it go. Nothing is going on," I reiterate.

He blows out a breath through his lips. "Fine, if you say so." He pauses. "Just promise me you'll be careful. I don't want Ryker to jeopardize anything for you. You've worked too hard to get where you are."

The way he says "Ryker" makes me smirk—like a dad who wants to threaten a boyfriend with a shotgun. "Professor West won't do anything to jeopardize my future; he's a professional."

"He's also a man."

"You can't see it, but I'm rolling my eyes at you."

I get Jake's concern for my future. But even if Ryker and I were to cross a line, my professor isn't the kind of person who, if things went south between us, would bad-mouth me to prevent me from getting a job after I graduate. And besides, the worst thing I think could happen is he'd lose his job, and we'd be hot gossip in Midland Springs for a while. Or I'd have to find another college to go to, since Ryker is the only professor who teaches the classes I need to graduate with my Master's in Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences.

Then there's the hope I have of us working together in the future. Something happening between us now—then later going south—could make things awkward or prevent that from ever happening.

I rub my forehead as if it will help me clear out my spiraling thoughts. I shouldn't even be thinking of this, anyway—because nothing can or is going to happen between me and my professor. We're just friends.

"Please say you'll be careful, for my sake?" Jake's voice breaks through the silence. "I need to hear you say it."

I groan. "Fine, I'll be careful."

"With the storms, too?"

I cackle. "With everything. I'll be the picture of careful. I'll even wear a helmet."

Jake snorts. "Please send me a picture of that."

"Not a chance."

We chat for another few minutes so I can catch him up on my boring life. Which until now has mostly consisted of studying, lab hours, writing papers, and the occasional solo storm chase to take some photos to sell on my website—a hobby of mine that started when I found some of my late mom's old storm photos in the attic as a teen.

A warm wind blows strands of hair in my face, and I stand to look at my surroundings. When I survey the sky to the east, I see dark clouds in the distance, and a feeling that's been in the pit of my stomach since I last looked at the radar grows.

My intuition is telling me to chase it. That this is going to be a storm that I'll want to capture with my camera. I'll have plenty of time to pack for Oklahoma when I get home, or I'll sacrifice sleep to do it.

“You disappear again?” Jake asks.

“Sorry, there’s a storm,” I say quickly. “My eyeballs got distracted by the wall cloud.”

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Jake chuckles. "I'll let you go then."

I sling my backpack over my shoulder and start walking toward campus parking, my steps hurried. "I love you, Jake."

"I love you, too. And please don't die. I need my bestie-slash-cousin in my life."

I laugh as my eyes look to the sky again, a sky that's turning more ominous with steely clouds that remind me of a smoldering gray monster getting ready to hunt. Where I am is sunny, a beautiful May day turning into evening, but my eyes won't leave the swirling storm cell in the distance.

"I promise I won't die. Cross my heart." Even though he can't see it, I make an X over my chest to complete our little tradition, one we've had since we were kids. If we make a promise we intend to keep, we have to do it.

"Good."

After we say our goodbyes, I continue walking, my pace picking up as I open my radar app on my phone. Once I'm in my car, if I drive fast, I think I can make it. Right now, the conditions aren't exactly right for a tornado, but I'll still get some amazing pictures. Lightning strikes are always a bestseller, especially when they're across the open plains.

I zoom in closer on the storm as I consider which route to take. My mind is so consumed with my thoughts that I don't see another person until I'm taking a direct hit to my side. I fall like I've been sacked, my phone flying from my hands as I cry

out, ass hitting the concrete.

“Shit! I’m so sorry, Finley,” a Southern male voice drawls.

I blink a few times, pain radiating from my butt as I register that whoever hit me like a linebacker knows my name. I suck in a breath and look up as Professor West kneels in front of me, his stupidly attractive bearded face invading my vision.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

The full-bodied timbre of his voice soothes the ache I’m feeling in my butt, but it also makes my already racing heart thump like I’m running a marathon. My palms sweat as I look up into his pale green eyes. “I’m okay.”

He studies me up and down, concern and apology etched on his features. “Are you sure? I ran into you really hard.”

I shut my eyes, still regaining my bearings. Not because of the hit, but because he’s so close to me I can smell his cologne. Or maybe it’s the way he smells? Like sandalwood and citrus: woody and crisp.

“Finley?” he asks again as I open my eyes. “I’m so sorry—I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“That makes two of us,” I mutter under my breath.

With my jaw clenched to avoid smelling Ryker, I move to get up. Sadly for me, the weight of my backpack has me falling backward.

“Whoa there, just sit for a minute,” he says, placing a hand on my shoulder. He thinks I fell back because I’m injured, not because I’m carrying too many books in my bag

along with my laptop—which, thank god, I put in a padded case.

I swallow, the heat from his hand not helping to settle the butterflies in my stomach at him being so close.

“I’m fine, really.” I try to get up again, but his handgrips me firm.

“Track my finger.” He holds up his pointer finger from his other hand.

I huff a small laugh. “I’m fine, Ryker—Professor West.”

The slipup has his pupils widening slightly in surprise, but he quickly follows it up with a panty-dropping smirk. The action has my cheeks turning red, just like that smile of his always has me doing. Jeez Louise, how am I going to survive storm chasing with him if I can’t be this close without acting like an idiot? Jake’s right—I need to be careful.

“Just follow my finger.” His voice is amused but edged with the type of command that would make anyone stop and listen. It’s why he makes a good professor and team leader.

With a sigh of acquiescence, I do as he asks. My eyes follow the digit back and forth and up and down until he’s satisfied.

“I think you’re concussion free.” He stands, but instead of holding out his hand, he moves behind me. Before I can ask what he’s doing, he pulls at the straps of my backpack and slides them from my arms.

When he stands to his full height again—which must be at least six feet, probably more—he frowns down at me.

“What’s in here, bricks?”

“Close enough,” I mumble.

He chuckles and moves back to my front, backpack slung over his shoulder as he holds out his hand. I take the offered help, my palm sliding into his. The hair on my arms stands on end, and I try to ignore the zinging sensation zipping through my body. It’s one I feel whenever our skin happens to touch—which isn’t often, but I remember all the times it has.

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That's a thought I'd rather not unpack right now...or ever.

Ryker's strong grip tightens, and he tugs me up with more force than I expected. I knew he was strong—at least he looks like it with his broad shoulders, toned biceps, and the kind of forearms women would pay good money to stare at—but I'm not a tiny person. Yet he lifted me like I weighed less than fifty pounds instead of two hundred plus. Maybe he should have the nickname Superman instead of Twister Tamer.

Once I'm on my feet, our bodies are close enough that I can see a few white hairs in his well-trimmed brown scruff that lines his square jaw. He's wearing a red ball cap backward over his shaggy hair, hair I've spent way too long staring at and fantasizing about touching, and a white T-shirt with "Tempest Trackers" printed in bold letters across it. He must have changed in his office after the final, because he did not look all casual and sexy when I walked out of his lecture hall. If I'm honest, he's always sexy, but seeing him dressed down in person rather than on social media is doing things to me.

We stare at each other for a few long seconds, an electric charge buzzing between us like a downed power line.

Boom!

I jump ten feet high, the action forcing my hand from his as thunder echoes around us. He smirks, not having moved from his position at all. Like he knew the thunder was going to happen.

“Scared, Finley?” His lip quirks.

I try to ignore the teasing way he said my name and shake my head. “Just surprised.”

He sticks his hands in the pockets of his jeans, still smiling. “I’ve been tracking that storm to the east; she’s a loud one.”

My brow furrows, and then I realize the reason Ryker and I ran into each other is because we were tracking the same storm, and both of us were heading out to chase it. My eyes follow his gaze. In the time we’ve been standing here, the sky has darkened considerably, and the sun is beginning to wink out from the incoming clouds though the air is still muggy and warm. I pull my attention from the sky and scan the ground for my phone to look at the radar, muttering a curse when I don’t see it.

“Looking for this?”

I glance back at Ryker, who still has my backpack slung over his shoulder, his bag at his feet, and my phone in his hand.

I smile sheepishly and take my phone from him. Our fingers brush, and once more, that spark passes between us as if our bodies can’t help themselves when we touch.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Don’t thank me; I’m the reason it went flying.”

“Did you play football in school or something?”

His brow pinches, and he shoots me a funny look as I tuck a strand of windblown hair behind my ear.

“I only ask because you hit me like you were making a dash for the end zone.”

Ryker’s smile falls, and he takes a step until we’re too close again, almost close enough to kiss. His green eyes survey me, and I think he even looks at my boobs.

He’s only concerned, Finley. Stop trying to read into this.

He brings his gaze back to mine. “Again, I’m so sorry,” he says. “I should’ve been paying attention to where I was going. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Without thinking, I rub my butt where I fell. The action draws his eyes downward again, and this time, he blatantly watches my hand with interest. When he licks his lips, the knot in his throat bobbing, my mouth goes dry, and I can’t stop myself from being glad that he’s looking and appears to like what he sees.

His breaths become shorter, and the scent of his cologne—that has a more woodsy scent up close—fills my nostrils again. Suddenly, all the reasons why Ryker and I can’t be more than what we are blow away, hiding in the recesses of my mind.

What were they again?

The wind picks up, bringing with it an earthy smell of soil and incoming rain, lifting me from my trance. I drop my hand from my sore ass. “I’m okay.”

Ryker’s eyes snap back to mine, and I see the moment it dawns on him that not only was he looking at my hand on my ass, but also, if someone were to walk by, we would look more like lovers than two people with a professional relationship.

He shifts on his feet but doesn’t take a step back. “I’ll try to be more careful this weekend, Finley. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

My stomach flips at the double meaning in his words. If we hadn't been dancing around each other all year, I wouldn't think twice about it, but I hear an undertone of desire I can't ignore. And if I'm being honest, I've seen the same desire in his actions—like the way he kept glancing at me during today's final or all those times I caught his eyes lingering when he thought I wasn't looking. I've tried to brush off those moments, pretend I didn't notice even when I knew I was looking at him just as often. But that doesn't erase them.

It also doesn't erase all the flirting we've done when I've volunteered to stay late after labs to go over storm data he collected or how we talked about what kind of food and music we liked during his office hours when I asked him to go over some data I collected on my own—things grad students and professors probably shouldn't be talking about. I shouldn't know that he loves bacon cheeseburgers and crispy french fries or that Kansas is one of his favorite bands.

My breath catches in my throat as I stare up at Ryker, the warmth of his body—which has gotten closer—sinking deep into my bones. I want to lean into him, see if his kisses will be soft or hard...maybe both.

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My lips part, the question “What if I don’t want you to be careful?” on the tip of my tongue, but nothing comes out.

Ryker’s attention moves to my lips, and his own mouth parts. He shifts on his feet again, his now phone-free hand moving as if he’s going to cup my cheek. My eyes start to flutter shut, his intense and alluring presence clouding my judgment. I feel the ghost of his fingertips on my jaw as a loud boom of thunder claps in the distance.

The spell between us breaks, and Ryker steps back. I blink a few times, trying to regain my bearings after being so close to him.

I open my mouth to speak, but Ryker takes out his phone from his back pocket and studies it. If I didn’t know him well, I’d think what just happened between us didn’t faze him, but I see the way his jaw clenches, and the veins in his neck are taut. He’s going to pretend like he didn’t nearly come within a breath of kissing his student.

The thought is a grounding reminder, and my rational brain comes back online. If I’m going to get through this weekend with him—and the next school year, for that matter—I need to pretend that didn’t happen. Even if it hurts my heart to do so.

To clear my head, I open up the radar on my phone and consider my route for chasing. I’m not going to let this interaction get in the way of taking my photos tonight—if anything, I’m more fueled to go now.

“The supercell to the east shows strong signs of rotation,” Ryker says, making me look back at him. “And the lifted condensation level is low enough for tornado formation. The—” He’s cut off by a phone alert. “Tornado warning right over Cattle

Creek.”

He grins like he was before we almost kissed and shifts my backpack over his shoulder, the one he’s made no move to give me.

“I had the same thought,” I say. “I’m going to head out so I don’t miss it.” I hold my hand out, pointing to my backpack. He gives me a strange look before simply adjusting the heavy strap over his shoulder.

“Are you chasing solo?” he asks.

“If I can get my backpack with my car keys in it from you, then yes.”

That makes him smile, and his body relaxes a bit as he chuckles. “I was on my way to chase, too, if you hadn’t put that together.”

I nod at him, having already guessed that.

“My team is already in Oklahoma, so it’s just me. We could go together?” he asks. His tone is so hopeful, it makes my stomach flip-flop.

I blink at him. After what just happened between us, I figured the last thing he’d want is to be in a car with me—it should probably be the last thing I want, too. But the thought of chasing with him alone has me too excited. And it’s not only because of my attraction to him, it’s because he’s The Twister Tamer. Both teenage and current-adult Finley are freaking out at his offer.

“Really?”

“Safety in numbers,” he says matter-of-factly. But the glimmer in his eye tells me it’s more than that. Lots of people chase solo; it’s not uncommon.

“Right. Always good to be safe.”

We both smirk at each other, my stomach filling with more butterflies as another clap of thunder echoes overhead.

Ryker glances at his phone. “Are you in? Because we gotta go now.”

I don’t debate my options, because there is no debate. “I’m in.”

“Then let’s go, Ms. Buckley. We’ve got a twister to tame.”

Chapter three

Ryker

We’ve got a twisterto tame—who the fuck even says that out loud? Me, apparently. I’m that asshole.

I don’t take my words back, though, because my internet-famous saying makes Finley chuckle, the sound soft and lyrical. I relish in it, in the musicality and femininity of it. Especially when I spend most of my time around men who are the complete opposite of her. Men that laugh with their guts or hardly at all.

“Do you want to take my car or yours?”

Her question shakes me out of my thoughts—thoughts I shouldn’t be having about my student—as we walk quickly beside each other toward campus parking.

“What kind of car do you have?” I ask.

“A compact SUV.”

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“Do you have full coverage?”

“Duh.” She scoffs, the cute grin on her face reminding me of her youth. Which then reminds me I shouldn’t have asked to chase with her alone, not after our near-kiss a moment ago. We have this weekend, and we’ll be around other people on those chases. That’s a safer bet.

But I can’t go back on my request now, especially when she looks so excited, her body nearly vibrating with it. I would also be lying to myself if I said I wasn’t excited about it, too. I want to go with her, even if I know I shouldn’t go with her.

Romantic, sexual, or other intimate relationships between faculty and students are prohibited...

I clear my throat. “Where are you parked?”

“Right there.” She points to her car, not far from us.

“Let’s do yours, then; mine is on the other side of the lot.” I look down at my radar then back at her. “We don’t want to miss any action.”

A look of surprise colors her features, and I lift a brow at her.

“Is that not okay with you?”

She shakes her head. “You’re really fine with me driving?”

I chuckle. “My ego is not that fragile—most of the time.”

She grins and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Okay, then, I’ll drive.”

“Great.” I shift the strap of her ridiculously heavy backpack on my shoulder. She tries to take it again, but I shake my head. Finley nods toward the car as a rosy flush colors her cheeks. It has me wondering what caused the blush, if it’s her response to me carrying her bag or simply me. Regardless, like earlier in my classroom, the flush of her skin affects me in inappropriate ways. My skin is tight and hot as I imagine other ways in which I could make her skin pink up like that.

“You can put my backpack here,” she says as we approach her car, opening the back to the cargo area. As the hatch lifts, I admire the neatly organized space. There’s an emergency pack, what looks like a hard camera case—at least I’m guessing that’s what it is since I know Finley is a photographer—and a rolled-up sleeping bag along with a few pillows tucked neatly inside.

“Did you go camping?”

She shakes her head, turning her chin down sheepishly. “Sometimes if I finish chasing late or I’m driving to Texas to see my cousin, I sleep in the back instead of getting a motel room.”

I put her backpack down and step away so she can close the trunk. When it’s secured, I turn toward her. She makes a move to the driver’s side, but I gently take hold of her wrist.

“Alone?” My voice is commanding and gruff. I sound like a caveman, but I can’t help it. She shouldn’t be sleeping alone in her car between chases—or any other time, for that matter. It’s not safe, especially with how many idiots are out on the road these days.

Chasing solo leads to desolate areas that even me and the guys don't feel comfortable sleeping in.

Finley stares at my hand wrapped around her wrist then flicks her eyes back to mine with a curiosity that makes my stomach flip. "Yes, alone. Why?" she asks.

Tension hangs tight in the air between us, and it takes me a second to realize that my question could have been perceived as a way to figure out if she's single. No matter the meaning, I'm not acting very professor-like right now. I pull my hand away and drop it at my side. "Just be careful," I say swiftly. "I don't want you to get hurt when you're out alone."

Her eyes narrow. "What is it with men telling me to be careful today? I'm being careful."

My mouth opens to speak, but I don't know what to say because I obviously pushed a button. Before I can ask her about her comment, she walks away and gets into her car.

I remove my cap and thread my fingers through my damp hair. It's a muggy day, and being around Finley doesn't exactly keep me cool. With a sigh, I place my hat on my head in its backward position, bracing myself for being in a car with her for one more day than I had planned. Hawk is going to have a fucking field day when he finds out she chased with me alone. But even considering the thoughts in my head—which are probably a fireable offense all on their own—we have not crossed any lines.

You almost kissed her.

My shoulders stiffen, but I still refuse to believe I did. I ran into her, I was only making sure she was okay, I wasn't about to cup her jaw—

You looked at her boobs, the inner voice nags, and imagined it was your hand touching her ass instead of her own.

I rub my face and do my best to clear those notions from my mind. Even if I did almost kiss her and do all those other things, it doesn't matter now. I'll just keep reminding myself that I'm her professor and she's my student. I'm going to be her team leader this weekend, and we're going to keep it professional. I'm going to be the Ryker that I always am during chases: confident, cool, casual. It's going to be fine.

"Are you going to tame the storm by staring at it, Professor West?"

Fuck. Professor West. The formal title from her lips sounds good.

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Too good.

Goddammit, I definitely should not like it when she calls me that—most of my students call me that, if not all of them. I attempt a calming inhale and look into Finley’s eyes. She has her window down and her arm resting on the door as she looks back at me, upper lip twitching in amusement.

I shoot her a lopsided grin, one a professor, aka me, should once again not be giving his student.

“I’m coming.”

Chapter four

Finley

FALL SEMESTER—NINE MONTHS AGO

I smooth my hand over the front of my worn green sweatshirt, shifting nervously on my feet as I stare at the frosted glass window that reads: Ryker West, PhD.

Why did I wear this old sweatshirt today? My jeans aren’t much better. They have a rip in the thigh and are faded from years of wearing them. Couldn’t I have picked something nicer?

I internally scold myself as I hike my backpack up my shoulders. I shouldn’t be nervous nor should I care that I’m dressed like a normal college student to see my

professor during his office hours. I am a normal college student.

But I can't help it. He's the Ryker West. Extreme meteorologist and one of the best storm chasers in the world. The Twister Tamer. He's the reason I decided to do my master's at Midland Springs University. I wanted to learn from him—from the best. And so far, every lecture and minute I've spent in his presence has shown me that I made the right choice. He's smart, funny, the kind of professor that makes students enjoy learning. He also makes weather easy to understand. Basically, he's all the things I love about a teacher.

I blow out a breath and lift my fist, hovering it inches away from the door before I knock. Just because you have a schoolgirl crush on your professor doesn't mean you can't act like a normal person. Be cool. Your outfit is fine.

After another few moments of calming myself, I rap on the door three times and hear a throat clear. "Come in!"

I shiver at the warm resonance of Ryker's voice and push open the door.

I expect him to be looking up from his desk when I walk in, but instead, he's focused on his computer screen. There's a window behind him, the late afternoon September sunlight backlighting his profile as he leans closer to look at whatever is on his screen. Butterflies multiply in my stomach as I stare at him, my fingers itching to run through his tapered rich brown hair with tiny flecks of gray in it.

No. No, Finley. You need to stop ogling your professor. You're here to learn, remember?

Ryker mutters something under his breath, and I wonder what I should do. Should I say hi? Walk in and sit?

I take a step forward, and that breaks his concentration. He glances my way then puts his eyes back on his computer. My stomach falls, but then he sits straighter, green eyes snapping to mine and lips turning up at the corners.

“Finley.” He says my name with clear surprise. “Please, come in.” He waves at me with his hand, pointing to the chair in front of his desk.

The butterflies return, and I slip my backpack off my shoulder, setting it on the ground as I sit in the hard wooden chair. If I didn’t know any better, I would say he sounded excited to see me. But that would be silly.

Once I’m settled, I turn my eyes back to him and find there’s still a smile on his lips. His pale green eyes—which remind me of jades—are sparkling. I do everything in my power to keep from flushing, tucking a strand of loose hair behind my ear. His eyes track the movement as he leans back and rests his forearms on the arms of his chair. He’s got on a thin long-sleeved shirt, and it’s pushed up to his elbows so I can see his corded muscles.

Between his eyes watching me intently, his smile, and now his godforsaken forearms, I can’t stop my cheeks from turning red. I glance down at my lap quickly and will myself to stop being weird.

When I look up, Ryker smiles like he knows what I was thinking. But there’s no way he does, because I doubt he’d be smiling if he did. He’d probably tell me to get out.

“What can I do for you, Finley?”

His question along with my name does things to my insides, but before I can get out what I came here for, my eye catches the image of a tornado on his screen. It’s tilted away from me, but I can see enough of it to know what it is.

“Is that the Dead Man Walking tornado from last weekend?” The excitement in my voice is palpable as I scoot forward in my chair to try to see more of it.

“It is.”

I glance back at Ryker, and he’s grinning like a fool. “Wow. I can’t believe you saw it in person!”

Surprise lights his features. “You watched the chase?”

Busted. My body heats as my heart rate picks up, and I wish I could go bury my head in sand. “Yeah...” I manage to eke out. “Is that weird?”

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He looks at me funny, eyes squinting in confusion. “Why would that be weird?”

Yeah, Finley, why would that be weird? I sure as hell made it weird now.

“I, um—I suppose it’s not.”

His cheek twitches in a lopsided smile, then he turns his computer monitor so I can see the tornado better.

“Holy cow,” I breathe, studying the freeze frame of the multi-vortex tornado. The two funnels look like a man walking through the sky, destroying anything in its path. That’s why it’s called “Dead Man Walking”—they are a truly terrifying but amazing phenomena of Mother Nature. “What was it like?”

My gaze moves back to Ryker, but his eyes are on me instead of the tornado. They have the same glazed over look that mine must get when I’m thinking about him. That can’t be, though—I must be reading it wrong.

After a moment, he blinks and sits up in his chair. “Beautiful, shit-inducing scary, but a thing to behold.” He presses the spacebar on his keyboard, and the video starts up. The twisters are rotating, walking across the video like thick legs. His team was so close I can hear the whistling roar of the funnels as they tear across the Texas plains.

Eventually, Ryker comes on-screen, and my heart beats even faster. I remember this moment from when I watched the livestream. He has a hand on his head to stop the red backward cap he’s wearing from flying off, and he’s smiling so wide I can see his teeth and his eyes crinkling at the corners.

He yells “Can you fucking believe this, man?” to a teammate off-screen before he cheers and hollers in his excitement. Then he turns to the camera. “Are you seeing this, everyone? There’s no taming this twister. You can only stand back and hope it doesn’t eat you alive!”

Ryker pauses the video again after another few seconds, and I smile at him. “I can’t believe you were that close.”

“I’ll never forget it, that’s for sure.” He points to a few scratches on his cheek. “Maybe they’ll scar, and I’ll really never forget it.”

I laugh softly and sit forward in my chair so I can see him better. They’re shallow cuts so they won’t scar, but I can’t deny they’d probably be sexy if they did. Not that Ryker needs to be more sexy...

I wet my lips. “I wish I could’ve seen it in person. I wanted to take photos, but I couldn’t get to Texas with all my schoolwork.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You take storm photos?”

I play with the thin silver ring I have on my middle finger, one in the shape of a lightning bolt. “Yeah, um—it’s a hobby of mine.”

“Do you have some on you?” His eyes are shimmering with a giddiness that has the Twister Tamer fangirl in me jumping up and down. My weather idol wants to see my photography!

“Yeah, I do.”

“Do you mind showing me some?”

I shake my head, not caring that I came here to discuss dew points, probabilities, and other data that normally I'd find interesting but right now sounds terribly boring. Ryker West is asking to see my storm photos.

I reach down to grab my bag and pull out a folder. "I just developed these in the school's dark room—I was trying a little experiment with film instead of digital."

More surprise colors his features. "You take photography classes as well?"

I nod. "Figure if I'm paying all this money to be here, might as well, right?"

He chuckles as I hold out the folder to him. "Very true." He places the folder on his desk, and nerves kick up inside me as I realize Ryker is going to be looking at my photos. I wanted him to, but now, he's actually doing it.

I bite my lower lip as he opens the folder with a care so deliberate it feels out of place on a man who looks like him. Tall, muscular, a little rough around the edges.

His mouth parts as he stares at the image on top. It's of a wallcloud in western Kansas I snapped two weeks ago. It hangs low in the sky, dark gray and ominous like the ceiling of a collapsing cathedral. What I love most about it is that its edges are ragged and trailing thin wisps of vapor that twist like ghostly fingers. It's creepy and beautiful.

Ryker leans closer to study the image, his fingers hovering over the cloud like he can feel its movement. "Finley...this is incredible."

The moisture in my mouth disappears, and warmth blooms all the way from my toes to the top of my head from his praise—from the way he almost whispered my name. "Thank you."

He gently shuffles to the next image of a lightning strike in Oklahoma then to another image of a funnel cloud from that same storm.

When he's done, he hands the folder back to me. He was mostly quiet as he studied each one, only muttering words of praise or sounds of awe. My insides have turned into a puddle of goo.

His eyes meet mine. "You're very talented."

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I flush for what feels like the millionth time. “Thanks, I love doing it.” The words feel funny on my tongue, but his smile settles me a little.

“I can tell. You’ve captured how much you love it in those photos.”

I smile back at him, and for a few moments, we stare at each other. I lick my now dry lips, and Ryker’s gaze drops to my mouth. He mirrors my action, but when his tongue connects with his lips, he bristles, and his jaw tenses beneath his well-trimmed scruff.

“Did you have a question or something I could help you with?” he asks.

For a moment, I’m confused, but then I remember I came here during office hours. “Oh.” I laugh awkwardly. “Yes, I did. Sorry, the tornado distracted me.”

His shoulders ease a bit, and he leans back in his chair, transforming into the Professor West I’ve come to know from class. Professional yet relaxed. “Tornadoes can be distracting.”

So can professors, I think to myself. I reach down to my backpack, take out some data from our class the other day, and lay it on his desk.

“I’d love your opinion on something I noticed within the March Glen EF4 data that I couldn’t see in your team’s findings.”

He cocks his head to the side and smirks. “Are you saying we missed something, Ms. Buckley?”

My belly does a flip-flop at my formal name, and before I can analyze if that was flirting or friendly teasing, I smirk back. “That’s what I’m here to find out.”

He steeples his fingers in front of him. “Then lay it on me.”

Chapter five

Ryker

PRESENT DAY

“Look at that beauty,” I whistle as we crest over the top of a hill.

“Incredible,” she says, voice breathless in her amazement. “It’s a healthy supercell. Impressive wall cloud.”

My pulse spikes as Finley accelerates, my eyes taking in every aspect of the storm we’re approaching. She’s right, of course—the supercell is healthy. And the wall cloud, a dark, low-hanging section of clouds underneath the thunderstorm, makes it appear as if the sky is sinking.

“Does it ever get old?” she asks.

I turn my gaze back to her and study her profile—silky hair blowing in the wind from the open windows, round face, apple-shaped cheeks that are pink from a tiny bit of blush. “Chasing?”

“Yeah.”

“Does it get old for you?” I counter.

“No. But I haven’t been doing this for long.”

I smirk. “Are you saying I’m old?”

Finley grips the steering wheel. “No, that’s not what I meant. I—”

I chuckle and cut her off. “I was kidding.” When her grip relaxes, I continue. “Storms are always different. One is never the same as the other. They’re unpredictable, wild, and still so much of them are a mystery. So no, they never get old—because they’re always new.”

A ghost of a smile crosses her lips. “I like that.”

Muggy wind whips through the cab of the car, and I place my hand on her shoulder in excitement. “We hit warm air. Look at that inflow band.”

The buzzing energy between us ratchets up, and I squeeze her shoulder a little tighter, forgetting that I shouldn’t be touching her.

“You really think a tornado will touch down?” she asks. “When I looked at the radar earlier, I wasn’t sure.”

I take my hand from her shoulder and point up at the supercell. “Look at this storm, and tell me what you think.”

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Finley leans forward in her seat, hands gripping the wheel to get a better look up at the sky that's now turned a pale and sickly green. Another sign of what's to come.

"It's rotating!" When she sits back, her smile is wide. "I think you're right."

I glance down at my phone then look back at the developing storm. "Up here, you'll see a road on the left. Take that."

"We'll be far enough away, right?"

"Scared, Finley?" I ask, repeating my quip from earlier.

"Are you?" she volleys back, our eyes locking for a moment.

"That's part of the fun."

She tips her chin and turns her sparkling eyes back to the road while I determine the exit routes in case we need one.

"Ryker, holy crap. Look!"

My chest smarts when I hear her speak my name. I may like when she calls me Professor West, but my name? Since the moment she first slipped up, using it when she asked me a question in front of the whole class, I've craved the sound of it on her lips—especially at night when I'm alone in my home, trying not to think of her as I wrap my hand around my di—

I clear my throat and follow her finger, which is pointing to the supercell now directly in front of us. Another kind of spark lights in my chest. “We’ve got a funnel!” I pump my fist. “Drivedown this road then pull off to the side. That was your camera in the back, right?”

“Like I would leave it behind?”

We give each other a knowing smile, and then she steps on the gas. When we’re another mile down the road, she asks, “Are we close enough now?”

She bounces in her seat, and I bite my tongue at her palpable joy and thrill for storm chasing. I can’t wait to see her with my team and find out how she reacts to that environment. I know she’ll thrive in it.

Her passion for chasing is another reason she got the spot for this weekend’s chase—second only to how smart she is. Over the last year, I’ve learned a lot about all of my students, but Finley gets the best grades, chases solo often, shows up to my office hours when she has questions, even challenges me on data she believes I’ve missed.

I still remember the first time she came to my office a month after class started and did just that. It was hard not to fall inappropriately in love with her right then and there. No other student had done that before—too scared to challenge the “Twister Tamer.” But not Finley.

“Let’s stay conservative with this one,” I say, interrupting my own thoughts. “We’ll have plenty of opportunities this weekend to get up close and personal when we have Thor.”

“Right.” She pulls off to the side of the road. “Probably better to be inside a tornado with an armored vehicle built for that sort of thing.”

“Always a good idea,” I quip.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and push open the door. Sticky wind whips around me as I step out of the car, and it’s so strong that I have to hold my hat down and keep my footing steady.

As I make my way to the front of the car, Finley heads for her camera. I take a moment to type out a quick text to my communications lead, Ezra. Since he’s in Oklahoma with the rest of my team, I’ve been keeping him updated so I can have another pair of eyes on the storm.

ME

Looking like this is going to drop a tornado. I’ve sent you my location.

EZRA

Copy that, boss.

ME

Alert the National Weather Service that I have a confirmed funnel, and I’ll update upon touchdown.

EZRA

You think this is my first rodeo?

ME

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Just making sure you don't fall off the bull.

EZRA

Never.

I pocket my phone and crouch low to the ground so I can get a better look up. Much of studying storms comes from looking at doppler and forecasts, but nothing compares to this, to being in the field and looking Mother Nature directly in the eye. It's exhilarating and everything I live for. What I'll probably die for.

"That's a massive mesocyclone!" Finley exclaims as she comes up beside me with her camera around her neck, snapping a photo as she says it.

My gaze tracks to the eye of the storm only a few miles from us, standing to my full height and swaying a bit as wind gusts unpredictably and the storm draws air inward. "It has a massive updraft base," I comment. "Can you feel the wind blowing into the supercell?"

She grins wide as she tucks hair behind her ear that keeps whipping in front of her face. "I can feel it." She laughs. "Remind me to bring a hair tie next time."

The unprofessional side of me wants to say no. I like watching her chestnut-colored locks blowing in the wind around her soft features. But of course I don't say that—instead, I smile back at her before I walk to the center of the road.

I study the mesocyclone that's closer to us now. "Finley, it's about to happen. Look at

the spin on the backside.”

I hear the click of her camera snapping before she sidles up to me. “That’s a lot of spin, don’t you think? It’s tightening, too.”

Her observation again confirms that I didn’t make a mistake in choosing her for the chase this weekend. Finley knows storms. She’s not only book smart, but she’s also got kick-ass spotting and observational skills that I believe she acquired from photographing and chasing on her own—either that, or she was born to chase like I was. Nevertheless, she’s perfect for this job.

The wind dies down for a moment and things go quiet—the calm before the storm that happens when the moist air that fuels the storm is pulled in. In another moment, the wind gusts again, and I point to the clouds. “It’s trying!”

“Ryker!” Finley cries, her hand gripping my bicep as her eyes sparkle with pure happiness. “It’s going to do it! We’re going to get a tornado.”

We both let out a happy laugh as lightning splits the sky, briefly illuminating the darkened storm clouds. Light rain begins to fall, and my eyes flick to the soybean plants bending in the open fields, their leaves dancing in the growing wind. My pulse quickens, and my body freezes as I study the direction of the wind and the swirling funnel that appears closer to us than it was before. The inflow winds near the storm’s updraft base have become louder and more intense, pulling warm, moist air into the heart of the storm, feeding its rotation.

Fuck me. This storm is about to explode, and it’s unstable. It’s also nearly on top of us now. “Get in the car, Finley.”

I hear her laugh, and I know she hasn’t heard me. She’s too enraptured by what she’s seeing and the adrenaline of it all. “It’s amazing, Ryker! This storm is moving

fast—I've never seen anything like this in person."

I place my hand over hers, the one that's still gripping my bicep to get her attention. Her brilliant smile falls when she sees the seriousness on my face. "Get in the car! We need to back up and get further out."

I tilt my head back up to the clouds. Finley is correct—the storm is moving fast. Too fast. I thought we were far enough out that we could observe and be safe, but I've put us right in harm's way. How the fuck did I let this happen?

You know how this happened. You let your dick take the lead, you prick.

I push away the thoughts. "Come on, we need to move now!"

Without another word, both of us head to her car as fast as we can. Thankfully, she's left the engine on like she's been prepped to do in a live chase. More thunder booms overhead, and the sky is so dark someone would think it was almost night.

I have the protective urge to say I'll drive, but I told her she could take the wheel, and this is her car. I don't want to take it back and make her think that I am a misogynistic ass. I know I can trust her, even though we've never chased together before.

Once we're inside, Finley almost throws her camera on the floor of the backseat before placing her hands on the wheel. The way she parked, my side is facing the storm. I look out my window to get a better view of the supercell, and my body goes cold.

"Shit, she's fully condensing!" Panic mingles with the adrenaline-fueled excitement I can never suppress when it comes to tornadoes, no matter the danger. I grab my phone and see Ezra's been trying to call. I start typing a text about our situation right as a powerful gust of wind shakes the car, stopping me.

“Fuck, Ryker, which way should I go?” Finley yells.

I study the cell and make a quick decision. “Go back the way we came, and step on it.”

“Oh my god, Ryker. The tornado is on the ground!”

The car wobbles again, and my gaze focuses on the beast that’s dropped—it has to be at least two hundred yards wide already. The black vortex kicks up debris as it rotates through the field, and I know we’re in trouble. “Go, Finley, go, go, go!”

“Okay!” she yells and steps on the gas. My body jerks as she turns the car around, gravel spitting from the tires and shocks springing as she whips us back in the direction we came. I turn my gaze to look at the tornado ripping to our left, inching closer to the road as its base gets larger. The debris field is also growing.

Shit. Shit. Shit. There’s no way this thing isn’t going to catch up to us.

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“Debris!” Finley yells. My head whips from the storm to the front of the road where something that looks like fencing flies past us, almost hitting her car. My head follows it as it soars past Finley’s window, barely missing the rearview mirror.

My hands itch, and my foot presses down on an imaginary pedal. “Faster, Finley!”

She punches the gas while glancing at the storm as best she can. “Holy shit—it looks like it’s not moving!” she yells.

She’s right, and the fear in her voice only locks in what we both know: This twister is heading right toward us. If it was shifting laterally, that would be another thing—but it’s not.

My stomach rolls, and a part of my brain tries to figure out why I didn’t know this would happen. If Finley gets injured or dies, it’s completely on me. She may know storms, but I’ve been doing this longer, and I’m the expert, the experienced one. I know better. Of course I’ve had close calls but not with one of my students in the vehicle with me or since the early days of my career.

“Push faster,” I attempt to say calmly. “Once we’re on the main road, we can hook—”

“It’s moving too fast!” she interrupts.

I don’t want to say she’s right, but she is. However, we don’t have another option. “Don’t look back—just drive.”

“Okay, okay, okay!” she chants as rain pounds harder against the windshield. She switches on the wipers, the blades swiping furiously to clear her view as she floors it, speeding like there’s no tomorrow.

When she comes to the main road and turns onto it, the wheels squeal against the pavement, and the smell of the rubber burning fills the car. I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I’m sure it’s Ezra, but I don’t have time to pick up. His yelling through the phone isn’t going to change this situation we’re in.

A situation I’ll have to take a closer look at if we survive, because I was distracted by Finley. This storm should’ve been a textbook chase, one that maybe didn’t even set down a tornado—or at least not one this unstable. My brain is frantically trying to understand why it’s happening. It could’ve been a sudden change in wind shear or instability on the ground I didn’t see that caused the storm to shift direction. Yet none of that changes the fact that I was more focused on the way the wind blew Finley’s hair than our safety.

“We’re not going to outrun it!” she yells shakily, stating what I already know.

“I need you to listen to me, alright? We’re going to be fine.”

“Are you really going to lie to me right now?”

Despite the situation we’re in, I laugh. Finley laughs lightly, too, but it lasts for only a moment because a piece of debris hits the car, forcing her to swerve. She yelps in surprise, and I grab the wheel on instinct to keep it steady.

“You’ve got this,” I reassure her. “Breathe, and keep driving.” The freight-train noise of the tornado is getting louder, and the wind has gained enough speed that I’m surprised we’re still on the road.

I turn in my seat and look out the back window. It's utterly dark behind us, and I think the fucking thing is rain wrapped now, hiding how massive it is—and how truly close it is to us as well.

“Ryker. Fuck, Ryker. We're going to die, aren't we?”

I turn back so she can hear me loud and clear. “We're not going to die.” I press my eyelids together and think. “We're not.”

She cries out again as more debris hits the car, and she swerves. I press my hands to the dash and bark out, “Take a right up at the stop sign.”

“Ryker!”

“Do it! Take a right. If we stay in this car, we'll—” Die. But I don't say the last word out loud. “Take a right!” I yell.

Finley nods, and I hold on as she takes a fast right like I told her to. The rubber of the tires is burning again, and the rain is now coming in sheets. Thank Christ there's no hail.

“Now what?!”

“Stop!” The car comes to an abrupt halt, and I look into her panicked eyes. “I noticed a ditch when we were on our way here; we're going to make a run for it.”

“You're serious?” she balks. Her usually bright eyes are wide and terrified.

I cup her cheeks in my hands, feeling her clammy skin. “We have no other choice. Are you ready?”

After only a split second of indecision, she nods vigorously. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Our eyes remain locked for a second as the car rocks from a strong gust of wind and I try to convey my apology through my gaze. I wish I could shield her from this.

She nods, seeming to understand without words, and I know we can’t waste another second. I drop my hands and turn to push the door open as Finley mirrors my movement. It takes a few tries with the force of the gusts, but we both somehow manage to get out—probably thanks to sheer adrenaline.

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When we reach the front of her car, our hands clasp together in an earth-shattering grip. Then we run for our lives.

Chapter six

Finley

I can't see where I'm going, but all I know is that this is it. I'm going to die. I'm going to die, and Jake is going to bring me back to life so he can kill me again for breaking my promise not even two hours after I made it.

A fierce tug on my arm reminds me that I'm not alone. I'm not going to die alone.

Tears prick my eyes, and I'm not sure if I should hate myself for thinking that. If I die, Ryker probably will, too. Goddammit. My first chase with him, and it's going to be my last. Our last. And I'm the one who drove us, who couldn't get us out in time.

My legs pump as fast as they can, and I feel like I'm running through molasses. My heart bangs against my chest as if it's going to come out of it and land on the ground next to me. Then I'm hit with a tree branch or something pointy, because it scratches my cheek.

"Fuck!" I cry out. But the sound of the tornado bearing down on us is too loud for me to even hear my own words. I quickly glance over my shoulder, and wind mixed with dirt and grass pelts me as I see the swirling monster, which means this tornado has to be over half a mile wide now—or even more. The insane part of me wants to keep looking, but hands tug me to a stop, and I face Ryker.

“Get down!” he screams.

I spot the ditch and ungracefully drop into it, thankful that Ryker knew this was here. It can't be more than a couple of feet high on each side, but it might protect us.

My knees bang on the hard ground, and muddy water splashes on me, soaking my jeans and the white T-shirt I stupidly wore today. Before I can think more about my idiotic wardrobe choices, Ryker gets down next to me and tugs me into his side protectively, putting his lips to my ear.

“Lay down, and cover your head!”

The bellowing whistle of the tornado draws nearer, and I do as he says. The water in the ditch thankfully isn't deep, but I have to turn my head to the side and rest it on my forearm so I don't ingest it. A moment later, Ryker's muscular body lays completely over mine, covering me like my own personal shield. His strong arms cage me in so nothing can hit me.

“It's going to be okay, Fin. Try to brace yourself however you can!” he yells against my ear. Then I swear he places a kiss on my head before pressing his forehead into my hair.

My heart aches from not only the action but my shortened name as well. I'd imagined Ryker calling me that in my daydreams, though none of those daydreams involved lying in a muddy ditch while a tornado threatened to murder us.

With a shaky breath, I pry open my eyes and manage to shift under Ryker so I can tilt my chin up and look down the length of the ditch. I wasn't able to look long enough before, and I want to see the tornado approach. I want to see the very thing I love and have chased since I was a teenager come for me.

The moment my eyes connect with it and I'm able to really take it in, a kind of awe sparks in my chest for a brief moment as I witness the wedge tornado with such a wide debris field, I can't tell where it ends and the tornado begins. It sends a shiver up my spine considering what could be in it.

It barrels closer and closer, the wind ravaging us more than it was before. The smell of wet dirt and rain fills my nose as the muggy, dust-filled air makes it hard to breathe. The howling sound of the twister is deafening, and within another few seconds, it's on top of us.

My eyes slam shut, and every muscle in Ryker's body locks as the tornado barrels over us, relentless and unforgiving. I start to pray, not knowing what else to do. I pray to God that we make it out of this. That I get to see Ryker smile and hear Jake's laugh again. That I get to walk into my dad's house and see him yelling at a football game as if the team can hear him through the TV.

I'm not ready to go meet my mom on the other side yet. I'm not ready.

"It's okay, Finley!" Ryker yells, though I can hardly hear him. "I've got you. I've got you." But who's got you? I want to ask. I don't know how he's staying put, how he's holding on.

I pray harder, and I hear him grunt and strain as he tries to remain over me. Yet somehow, by some miracle, he continues to stay put. His body is a heavy and comforting weight on my back and legs as he braces himself harder. His legs shift, and his feet and hands press into the ditch, holding us down like an anchor.

My ears ring from what really does sound like a freight train over us, and I try to focus on the feeling of Ryker's heart thumping on my back and his muscles tensing, letting me know he's still with me. Still alive.

Several more pained sounds escape his lips as the storm hurtles above us furiously like the demon from hell that it is. The longer the seconds drag on, the more I want to open my eyes, to see the inside of one of Mother Nature's greatest phenomena, but I don't do it. Instead, I zone out and focus on Ryker, on his short, hot breaths against my neck and his heart that's still beating against my back.

I force my body to relax and fully surrender, accepting my fate.

After what is probably a few more seconds but feels like several minutes, the sound of the train begins to fade, and my ears pop. Wind brushes across my wet cheeks and damp hair, but it's not as violent now. More seconds tick by, and the sound of the tornado continues to lessen and move away.

"Finley, open your eyes."

Ryker's voice is distorted and seems far away, so I press my eyes tighter together, worried if I open them I'll be greeted by the pearly gates.

"Finley." His voice sounds clearer now. "It's over." Another pause as he breathes. "You can open your eyes." The crack in his hoarse voice is what finally makes me do it. My eyes adjust to the gray light, and I blink a few times.

Ryker helps me turn over, his hand cupping the back of my head so it's not in the water, but his body still presses into mine as he scans me for injury while I stare up at him, wide-eyed. When he's satisfied I'm in one piece, his eyes connect with mine, pupils blown out and brow creased with what I assume is both worry and relief.

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“We’re alive,” I state.

“We’re alive,” he confirms.

“How are we alive?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

I stare at him for a long moment, shock still rattling my system, before I finally ask, “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay—a little bruised up but fine. Are you?”

“I think so.”

He trails his wet fingers over my cheekbones, and I hiss when he brushes near the cut on my cheek.

He winces. “It’s shallow. I don’t think it’ll scar.”

I think of the day I first went to his office hours and saw the scratches on his cheek from a chase. I’d thought that scars on him would be so sexy.

A smile attempts to tug at my lips as I bring one of my hands up to push his wet hair—that appears almost black from the water—off his forehead. His hat is long gone, lost to the storm. A droplet of water lands on my cheek at my motion, and time once again seems to stand still. But now, it’s not because of our brush with death, it’s

because Ryker West is pressed against me chest to chest with his hand on my cheek. And now mine is on his.

“Finley, I’m sor—”

“Don’t say it. Don’t.”

“But—”

I press my finger to his lips, and his gaze remains locked on mine. “We just lived through a tornado. If you say you’re sorry for the choices we both made, I’m going to knee you in the balls.” The words are out of my mouth before I can think about not saying them to my professor.

There’s a short pause, and then a belly laugh bursts from Ryker’s lips. He smiles, the smile I prayed to see again. It’s beautiful, even more so with the burnt-orange light of sunset popping out through the clouds—an often annoying quirk of tornadoes. If it weren’t for the devastation they left behind, I’d almost forget they were ever there when the sun emerges in their wake.

I pull my finger from his lips, but he snatches it. The breath in my lungs goes on vacation as my lips part. His gaze drifts to my mouth and then back to mine. The spark that was gone from them a minute ago is there again, and his wet chest rises and falls beneath the T-shirt plastered to his skin and ripped in some places. My hips automatically lift up, and when I feel the hard length of him pressing against my heat, I nearly gasp.

Ryker doesn’t apologize. Instead, he continues to gaze into my eyes as if he’s seeing into my soul. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t move, he just stares—like he’s searching for something in them.

“Ryker.” His name leaves me in a whisper.

He blinks but doesn’t stop staring, his hold on me only tightening as our heads dip closer together. “Tell me not to kiss you, Finley.”

My chest tightens at his words, words I’ve only heard in my dirtiest professor fantasies. I wet my lips in anticipation of his kiss. They’re salty from sweat, earth, and probably tears, but I don’t care.

I shift my hips against his heat, and his forehead drops to mine as a breathless sound leaves his tight lips.

“And if I don’t want to?”

“Then tell me what I feel for you is wrong. That I need to get up and walk away.” His breath skitters over my lips, reminding me that he’s alive. I’m alive. We lived through a tornado and made it out with hardly a scratch on us. I think, if anything, we deserve this kiss, need this kiss more than we need anything else right now.

“I’m not going to tell you that, either,” I murmur.

Ryker abruptly shifts off me, and the evening’s cooling air against my wet clothes sends a shiver through me, making my nipples pebble. A brief wave of rejection hits, but it fades as Ryker pulls me from the ditch and onto the grassy bank with ease, pinning me to the ground. I don’t have time to question him, because his rough, warm lips descend on mine. I melt into him like ice cream in summer, allowing him to sweep me away.

Chapter seven

Ryker

I swallow the sound of surprise from Finley's lips as I seek entrance inside her mouth. I've thought about what a kiss with her would be like, and none of my fantasy scenarios included mauling her after a near-death experience.

"Ryker," she moans against my lips, her hands clawing down my sore back, but I revel in the pain. It only makes me feel more alive. She grinds against me, and my cock twitches against the zipper of my water-soaked jeans.

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I press my mouth harder to hers and use one of my hands to prop myself up while the other tangles in her wet hair. She opens to me beautifully, and my tongue strokes against hers. Her mouth is wet and warm, her soft body beneath me a dream. The only thing better than this would be if we were on a bed—or at least somewhere dry and soft. Yet there's an intensity to kissing her here as the evening turns into night.

Her hips wiggle, and I groan into her mouth as our tongues duel. Fuck, she tastes amazing, like a good whiskey, spicy and sweet. It's even better than I drummed up in my head when I'd fuck my hand thinking about her, thinking about what it would be like to throw caution to the wind and fuck her over my desk while I had her read forecasts and dew points to me.

The sounds of thunder rumbling in the distance spurs me to drive deeper into her mouth. We almost died. She almost died. I roll to my side and yank her full body into me, the smell of wet grass and dirt mixing with the faint sweetness of her floral perfume and sweat.

"Fuck," I groan between our kisses, which have only become more desperate. "I've wanted this."

She tugs at my bottom lip with her teeth as she drapes a thick-thighed leg over my hip so my cock is flush against her pussy. She rocks into me, using one of her hands to grip my arm for leverage.

"Me, too," she breathes as her chest presses into mine.

Even if it's now obvious, her verbal confirmation that this hasn't been a one-sided

attraction coupled with the feel of her fingers on my skin and her sex grinding against me only encourages me to do what I know is wrong. I grip her waist with my hand, digging my fingers into the soft flesh there, and tug at the bottom of her wet shirt. The moment my fingers brush the skin of her belly I growl, my hips grinding against hers for any kind of relief.

“Yes, Ryker,” she groans. “I need you.” Her hand slips from my arm and travels down my pecs then my abs, a shiver coursing up my spine from her touch. Her path only stops when she reaches the buckle of my jeans. The sound of the jingling metal acts like a key to a lock, and I lose all sense.

I flip her on her back again, and she puffs out a surprised squeal as my lips press to hers and her fingers continue to undo my belt. The vibration of the zipper sliding down has me bracing an arm above her while my other one brushes down her collarbone before squeezing one of her heavy breasts. I thumb her nipple through her wet clothes, earning me a moan.

I devour Finley recklessly, my lips bruising and rough against hers. It’s getting darker now, and the sound of crickets buzz. The storm has passed, yet now, a new storm is here, one that I cannot tame, even if it’s one that I should.

I grind into her, pinching her nipple.

“Yes, Ryker,” she whimpers, the sound fueling me.

“Take my cock out, Finley. Show me you want me.” I feel her nodding as I tug her lower lip between my teeth then suck on her tongue. Her hand seeks out the fly of my briefs, and when her warm palm grips my aching shaft, I release a feral noise against her lips and thrust into her touch.

“Fuck.” My own hand moves from her breast and down until I reach the button of her

jeans. I flip it open and pull the zipper down, getting out of her grip for a moment so I can look into her eyes.

Her amber irises are darker than usual, and the last of the sun glows on her pale face that dances with a light smattering of freckles. She looks so beautiful, so innocent—and she’s all fucking mine.

I keep my eyes on hers as she lifts her hips up so I can pull down her pants and underwear until I see her glistening sex.

I scissor open her pretty cunt framed with perfectly trimmed coarse brown hair and rub my thumb over her clit. She moans my name, hands gripping at the grass, movements desperate and horny. Jesus, I can’t wait any longer. I need to be inside her, to feel her, to know she’s here, she’s with me, and we’re okay.

I lay back down on top of her, our mouths meeting in a frenzy. I push my hips against hers, my heavy length sliding over her sex and causing us both to moan into each other’s mouths. I want to ask her if this is alright, but her hand moves between us and grips my length, now wet with her arousal. Her thumb teases the crown and slides my precum over the tip.

“Shit,” I gasp against her lips. I feel her smile, and then she’s shifting until I’m notched at her entrance, and the tip of my cock sinks in. I curse again at the tight wetness I feel there. I’m not even fully inside of her yet, and I know she’s going to squeeze me like a vise and make me see stars.

“Fuck me, Professor.”

My entire body shudders at her filthy forbidden words, and my hips punch forward to fully stake my claim inside her, my balls slapping against her skin as her cunt hugs me tight with every inner muscle she has. “Jesus, Finley.”

Her fingernails dig into my shoulder blades as her hips lift, pulling me deeper. Her head presses back into the ground. “Oh, god,” she cries. “You’re bigger than I imagined.”

I manage a shaky breath, kissing her neck and sucking on her pulse point as I circle my hips and make her moan. “How many times did you imagine fucking your professor, Ms. Buckley?”

Her nails dig deeper. I continue with the circles, not giving in to the wiggling hips urging me to move. “Please,” she begs.

I reward her with a small shallow thrust and bite her earlobe. “Be a good girl, and tell me.”

“Too many to count.”

I hum, the vibrations tickling my lips, and then I pull all the way out and thrust back in. Her body shifts with the force, and I brace my arm above her head. This angle, with her pants and underwear down around her ankles, makes her pussy tight and hot like liquid fire. Tighter than she would be if I could spread her open and pound her into the ground.

“Do that again,” she says before I capture her lips with mine.

I give her what she wants.

My hips thrust in and out, in and out, my pace picking up as I become frantic for her. I want to feel her walls pulse around me as she comes and hear my name on her lips while she reaches ecstasy. I want her nails to make me bleed for her and this pussy to never forget that I was inside it, branding her as mine.

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“Ryker, you feel so good,” she chants against my lips. “Harder.”

The base of my spine begins to tingle, and my balls draw up. “Touch yourself, Finley. Make yourself come.”

She moans a yes as I kiss her, stroking my tongue against hers and memorizing the taste of her. She gasps when she circles her clit, her hips lifting and her free hand moving to grip my shoulder.

I thrust harder and try not to close my eyes, but the feeling is too intense, too fucking good. Then Finley breaks our kiss and cries out, every muscle in her body tensing as she shatters. Her pussy constricts around me in quick flutters, dragging me over the edge and sending blinding white bursting behind my eyelids as I come. My release spills inside her as she grips me, our faces buried in each other’s necks.

My thrusts turn choppy and shallow as I ride us through our mutual orgasms, my body slowly coming down from the adrenaline of the tornado and the best sex of my life.

Sex that I had with Finley.

Sex that I had with my student, Finley.

Unprotected sex that I had with my twenty-five-year-old student, Finley.

My student, Finley.

I slip my softening length from her addictive heat and drop down beside her so our arms and legs are touching. For a while, we lay there, looking up at the dusky sky as our breathing evens out and reality crashes down around me, tightening my chest.

“Ryker,” Finley says after what seems like an hour. “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you that.”

She shifts beside me, and I turn to look at her. Finley is the picture of young and vulnerable now that my dick has stopped thinking for me. She’s a mess and shivering, and the cut on her cheek needs to be disinfected.

Goddammit, what was I thinking? I’m her teacher, her mentor. I took advantage of her after she almost died. I should be fired for this—I wouldn’t even fight it.

“I’m fine,” she says. “More than fine.”

I avoid her eyes and look down at her body, her half-clothed body with my cum dripping out of her onto the grass. It’s lewd. It’s forbidden. I probably shouldn’t like it, even if everything inside me does. Even if everything inside me wants to put her on her hands and knees and shove it back inside her then fill her with more until she’s so full of me it will drip out of her for days.

Romantic, sexual, or other intimate relationships between faculty and students are prohibited...

“We should go check on your car.”

At my words, Finley’s demeanor changes, and she chuckles disbelievingly. “My car? Are you serious?”

“It’s probably totaled. It’s getting dark, and we need to call for help. Get you checked out by medics.”

Finley repositions, pulling up her underwear and pants, ignoring the mess of us before standing. “I don’t need a medic. Do you?”

I shake my head.

“I’m going to find my car,” she snaps before taking off toward the side of the road where her car should be but is no longer.

I stand to follow her and tuck myself in, my body sore from the literal tornado that abused it. The ground is torn up and littered with debris, including what looks to be fencing. I weave around some bigger obstructions but easily catch up to her before she gets to the road.

“Please, wait!”

When she doesn’t, I gently catch her wrist.

She whirls to face me, tugging her hand away and crossing her arms over her chest. “What?” she barks, the anger in her tone causing me to flinch.

“Finley...” Her name on my lips is quiet as more guilt wracks my body. “Please, I—I shouldn’t have done that.”

Her eyes narrow. “At least be man enough to say what you shouldn’t have done.”

I run my hand over my face. “I took advantage of you.”

She scoffs. “Bullshit.”

“Finley—”

“I wanted it. I asked you for it. We’re two adults—”

“—who almost died. And you’re my student.”

“You care now?”

I swallow hard. “Like I said, I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you. It was wrong of me.”

Finley huffs and takes a step toward me. Our eyes lock, and I can see her still shivering, even more than she was before. I want to take her in my arms and keep her safe, warm. I want to comfort her and tell her that I’m lying. That I wanted her, that I still want her. I can’t, though. And I need to stop this before it goes any further.

“Are you saying you regret what happened?” she asks.

Her eyes bore into mine, her shoulders stiff and back straight. Finley is a woman who wants the truth—a truth I can’t give her—so I lie.

“Yes. I regret it.”

Her eyes turn glassy, and her chin quivers. My chest aches, and my hands itch to pull her into a hug and take my words back, but this is how things need to be between us.

I have to push her away. She's still my student until she graduates, and we have the chase starting tomorrow with my team.

And if I'm being honest with myself, even though it kills me, a little part of me does regret it. Not her, never her, but she is my student. I'm her superior. She was also under duress. I should've stopped myself from acting on my feelings for her, even though they're mutual.

Finley takes a step back and pushes down her tears. "Right. Well, I guess we should go find my car, Professor West. We're losing light."

Chapter eight

Finley

I feel as if I got hit by a tornado. Oh wait, I did get hit by a tornado. It's kind of exciting now that the fear has passed. Not many people live to tell that tale, but I haven't allowed the fact that I survived something that huge to really settle in. Not with a certain professor on my mind.

I take a large gulp of my second cup of coffee in my travel mug while I wait on the curb of my apartment for said professor to pick me up. Since my car is, in fact, totaled—along with my beautiful camera—I had to accept the ride to Oklahoma that Ryker offered me last night before we parted. There were no cars left to rent on such short notice, but it wouldn't have made sense for me to waste the money on one, anyway.

I take another large drink of coffee and stare up at the sky. It's only five-thirty in the morning, and the sun hasn't risen yet, leaving the sky dark to match my mood. I grumble to myself.

I want to be more excited about this chase—it's what I've been waiting for since not only the first time I saw Ryker and the Tempest Trackers online when I was a teen but also since he told our class that he'd be picking one person for this special chase and the chance to get on the scientific paper. But instead, I feel more trepidation than excitement.

My professor and I had sex—incredible, exhilarating, dirty sex—after we almost died. I squeeze my thighs together, the phantom feeling of his release between my legs making me squirm. Thankfully, I'm on birth control, and before Ryker drove away last night, I told him as much, letting him know there was no need to worry about pregnancy. Or an STD, for that matter, since I was tested at my last physical and haven't slept with anyone else in over a year.

He'd looked back at me wide-eyed, lips parted to say something, but I'd slammed his truck door and run to my apartment before I could hear if he had a response. It was juvenile, but I was tired, sore, uncomfortable, and pissed.

I understand that we crossed a line together, but it was a dick move to pull a complete one-eighty and say he regretted it, especially when we've spent the last year flirting and crossing lines with said flirting. I was lying to myself thinking that what we'd been doing was innocent and didn't mean anything. Students and professors do not spend hours together outside of the classroom, even if we were doing so under the guise of studying data during office hours.

I sigh to myself and squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. Younger me would've left last night with my heart in pieces. But even though I'm hurt and the whole situation has made me cranky, I'm going to do my best to try to not let it ruin my weekend.

This is my career. My life. If Professor West regrets our time together, then so be it. But I'm not going to make him regret picking me for this chase. Because although Ryker has been an inspiration and a mentor, I'm doing this chase for me. Even after

one of the very things I love almost killed me yesterday, I still want this. Going on this chase and being part of the research paper only benefits me in the long run.

I'm going to reinstate my promise to Jake and be careful—er, more careful. Professor West can fuck off.

Speak of the devil. Ryker's red truck rounds the corner, and I suck in a deep breath.

"You can do this, Finley," I mutter under my breath. "You can do this."

The purr of the truck's engine cuts off in front of me, and I straighten my shoulders while I wait for Ryker to step down from the vehicle. When he rounds the truck and stands in front of me, all of my previous gusto exits my body. He looks how he always looks: rugged, sexy, and swoonworthy.

He's replaced the red ball cap he lost yesterday with a new black one. It's backward again, and he's got on a black T-shirt with the graphic of a tornado and TT for Tempest Trackers on the front. His jaw is still scruffy, but it looks as though he's trimmed the hair, which only outlines the angles of his masculine jaw more. It doesn't help that the shallow scratches on his skin from our close call add to the worn and weathered look that makes him so attractive.

"Good morning." He tips his chin.

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I nod back, unable to trust myself with speech right now.

“I’ll take your bag, and you can hop in the front.”

I nod again as he moves to grab my duffel. Once he has it on his shoulder, I step by him to climb into the truck. I think he’s going to put my bag in the back, but instead, he moves to grab the door handle to open it for me at the same time I do. His action causes our hands to brush, and I yank my hand back as if I’ve been burned.

I glare at him. “I can open my own door.” He drops his hand, and I turn my face away from him, pulling open the truck door so he’s forced to step back. Then I hoist myself up into the cab and close the door with a slam.

Out of my periphery, Ryker continues to stand on the curb as if I slapped him. I keep staring forward and wonder if that was too harsh, but then I decide it wasn’t. He set the boundary last night; I’m only maintaining it.

After another second of standing there, he finally puts my bag in the back then makes his way to the driver’s side and gets in. There’s a heavy pause, and I sense his eyes on me, begging me to look at him. Realizing he’s not going to drive until I acquiesce, I turn to meet his gaze.

He stares, anguish clearly written all over his face. Which honestly pisses me right off. He’s not allowed to feel that way when he’s made his own dang bed.

“Finley,” he says on an exhale. “I’m sor—”

“No,” I snap. “Don’t.”

“I—”

“No. I don’t want to hear your apologies or explanations. What’s done is done. You made yourself clear about how you feel after what happened, and I’m here to chase and learn from you. Let’s pretend nothing ever happened.”

“Can you really do that?”

I clench my fists at my sides. “Can you?”

His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, and he finally turns his gaze from me to start the engine. Which leads me to believe that, like me, he can’t.

The silent tension in the truck isn’t lightened by Ryker’s choice of seventies and eighties music playing through the speakers. The cheery sound of Kansas singing “The Point of Know Return” only adds to the tightness of my skin and knotted stomach.

Ryker hasn’t made any effort to speak to me since I shut him down over an hour ago. Instead, he sings quietly along with the songs playing, a habit that might’ve been cute under different circumstances but is annoying now. The only words he offered were to mention we’d be picking up a chaser joining us thisweekend from across the Kansas-Oklahoma border—and once, he asked if I needed a bathroom break. I just shook my head.

When he finally exits the highway, I exhale a quiet sigh of relief that another person is going to be joining us. Hopefully, the distraction will help ease my anxiety over this entire situation. With Ryker so close to me and the ache of him still between my thighs, it’s hard to forget what we did together. Not that I could, anyway. It’s not only

the sex, either. It's the way he protected me, held me, put his life before mine—and that I actually slept with the man I've been crushing on for so long.

I bite the inside of my cheek and wish I could let out a scream or even call Jake. He'd tell me I was an idiot for what I allowed to happen, but then he'd crack a joke to make me feel better. Or threaten to cut off Ryker's balls. Maybe both. That thought makes me smile and huff a quiet laugh.

“What's funny?”

I jump at the sound of Ryker's voice as he comes to a stop at a red light. “Nothing,” I reply. It's not like I'm going to tell him I was thinking about my cousin cutting his balls off.

He huffs a breath of frustration, and I almost tell him this is his own doing. Had he not said he regretted what happened last night, we could've moved forward together and figured things out as we went along—or at least talked about what is or isn't going on between us and what the future should look like. But it's too late now. I'm using my rational brain and thinking clearly.

In a way, I should be thanking him. Because he's reminded me of why “we” can't happen. Ryker is my professor. He is, for all intents and purposes, my boss. I've most likely already screwed my chances (literally) of getting on this team permanently one day, not that it would be a good idea now, anyway. Especially if the last hour is a sneak peek into what's to come this weekend.

I almost laugh at how quickly I gave in to him yesterday. Yet in the end, despite our attraction and my longtime admiration of him, I'm going to blame the storm for our moment of weakness.

We were both coming down from the fear and adrenaline of the chase and our

almost-demise. Everything was heightened, including the sexual tension that has been building between us over the last year. It's no surprise we both snapped.

Hmm, maybe it's good we got it out of our systems? I shake my head. No, I should never have touched my professor. I should never have allowed myself to crush on him in the first place.

"We're almost there," he says.

I look out the window at the old neighborhood. It's after seven in the morning now, and the sun is rising, lighting up the row of houses as we turn into a cul-de-sac. We approach a single-story ranch-style home, one that's in need of a fresh coat of white paint, but it's charming with its porch swing and red shutters.

"His name is Joseph," Ryker says. "He's going to be our drone pilot and help with data analysis this weekend."

Recognition sparks in the back of my mind; I've heard that name before. I know he's not a usual chaser with TT, but the name sounds familiar.

I don't have to wait long to find out why, because the door to the home swings open as we come to a stop in the drive. The moment I see the top of a black cowboy hat with bright-gold detailing on the hatband, I'm grinning like the Cheshire cat.

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“Do you know him?” Ryker asks.

I ignore his question and unbuckle my seatbelt. I can feel the tension in my stomach lighten as I take in the familiar face of Joey. He sees me through the windshield, and his boyish grin makes my cheeks hurt from smiling wider. I push open the truck door and hop out without turning toward my professor.

“Holy shit! Is that Fin “The Shark” Finley?!” Joey exclaims in a Southern accent so heavy it makes my toes curl. I hasten my steps as he drops the bags he’s holding so I can throw my arms around him.

“I told you not to call me that!” I chuckle in fake annoyance as his arms wrap around me and squeeze so tight I think my lungs collapse.

“Whatever you say, Sharkie.”

I sink into the warmth of his lean muscled body for another second before I pull back to look into his sparkling blue eyes, faintly hearing the slam of a car door closing behind us.

“If you call me Sharkie, I’m calling you Sparkie.”

He cups his hands over his mouth and leans back. “Woof! Woof!”

I laugh. “I haven’t seen you in two years, and you haven’t changed a bit.”

“Why change what’s already perfect?”

I shake my head at him with an indulgent smile as he scans my body up and down.

“Speaking of perfection—you’re looking good, Fin.”

I flush and smack his chest playfully. “Oh, shut it. Your Okie charm doesn’t work on me.” He waggles his dark-blond eyebrows as a throat clears from behind me. It sounds annoyed for whatever reason.

I wink at my friend and step to the side so he can greet the ornery professor. In typical Joey fashion, he proceeds to check him out as shamelessly as he did to me a moment ago. His eyes move up and down Ryker’s toned form, and his roguish grin is obvious—at least to me. I press my lips together to keep a laugh in, remembering all the times he and I used to gush about our love for “The Twister Tamer” together.

Ryker’s hands are shoved in his jean pockets, but by the way his forearms are flexing, causing the corded veins to make an appearance, I know he’s clenching his hands into fists. I think it’s because Joey checked him out, but then I realize his eyes aren’t on Joey—they’re on me.

Is he...jealous?

The corner of my lip twitches, his annoyance a moment ago making sense now. But I don’t have time to think about my discovery, because Joey is rubbing his hands together in excitement and bouncing on the balls of his cowboy-booted feet.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the Tornado Daddy in the flesh!”

My eyes widen at the inappropriate nickname, but Ryker doesn’t get upset. He turns his gaze to Joey and lifts an eyebrow at him. “Seriously, Joseph? It’s not even eight am.”

Joey hoots and steps forward to clap Ryker on the back. They do their man-hug thing before Joey pulls back and grasps him by his upper arms. “It’s never too early to call someone Daddy. Especially when said Daddy has got such great biceps.” He squeezes them for emphasis, and Ryker pushes him off with a groan.

Laughter tickles the back of my throat as I watch the two men interact, and I wonder how they met. The last time I saw Joey, he was only a fan of his like I was.

Joey chuckles as he turns back to me and slings an arm around my shoulders, yanking me into him. “You didn’t tell me that my Finley was going to be on the chase!”

I roll my eyes at his choice of words. Joey loves to claim people as his and give them nicknames. I’ve known that since the first day I met him during undergrad.

Ryker’s features turn serious again, and his jaw flexes. “I didn’t realize you knew Ms. Buckley.”

The way he calls me Ms. Buckley makes my toes curl in my sneakers—and not in a good way. It’s not at all like how it felt to hear him say it when he was buried deep inside me.

“Ooh, Ms. Buckley. I like that!”

I stab my finger into his chest, and he winces. “Don’t you dare.”

“But he gets to call you it.” Joey pouts.

I sneak a glance at Ryker. He’s still tense, and if I’m reading him right, he’s annoyed or jealous again—maybe both.

“He’s my professor,” I clarify. This time, there’s no mistaking Ryker’s flinch, but he

recovers quickly.

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“Shit! You’re the amazing master’s student he’s gushed to me about?” Joey asks.

I flip my full attention to Professor West now. To my surprise, he doesn’t look embarrassed that he was just outed for talking about me.

“She’s the one,” he says, voice laced with soft admiration. His eyes meet mine, and warmth pools in my stomach, my body forgetting for a moment that we’re mad at him.

“Well, fuck me sideways! I should’ve put the pieces together. But I forgot you were studying at Midland Springs for your master’s program.”

I shove away the warm fuzzy feeling and smile at Joey. “It’s okay, we haven’t checked in for a while now. Last I knew, you were working for your local Channel 5.”

Joey drops his arm from my shoulders. “Decided it wasn’t for me. Just had my last day, actually.”

“Congrats?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Hell yeah. Called up Tornado Daddy a couple of weeks ago and asked if I could come along on a few chases to see where things go. I’ve gotten into drone operating and analyzing storm data from chases in the last year.”

“I didn’t know you chased together—or that you knew each other.”

Joey moves us and throws his arm around Ryker now, too, much to the professor's annoyance. But I can see a faint smile hiding underneath his glower.

"T-Daddy and I go way back—like a whole year and a half."

Ryker ducks out from under Joey's arm and picks up one of his bags for him. "Don't call me that."

"Would you rather I call you Twister Tamer?"

"No." He groans.

"Oh good, because then I'd have to return all my custom T-shirts."

My eyes widen, and I look at Joey's chest. He's got a brown plaid button-up on with a white T peeking out from underneath.

"You're joking," Ryker says.

Joey shrugs. "I guess you'll have to find out. Or one of you can undress me. But I think we should probably get on the road so we don't miss any tornadoes."

Ryker says something under his breath that sounds a lot like "kill me now" before walking off toward the truck with Joey's bag.

Joey's arm squeezes my shoulders, and I look up at his boyish face to see sandy-blond hair peeking out from under his hat.

"You really have not changed." I grin.

"Would you want me to?"

“Not a chance.”

Chapter nine

Ryker

“Then the old man looks out at the tornado that just destroyed his house and yells, ‘Thanks for the chance to redecorate—I hated my ex-wife’s wallpaper!’”

Finley’s pretty laugh floats through the truck, and while I should be happy she’s laughing and smiling after yesterday, I’m not. Because Joseph fucking Jensen is the one making her laugh and not me.

Finley turns her body so she can see Joey in the back seat better. “You’re serious?” she asks.

“I don’t lie, Ms. Buckley.”

Finley turns back around, and I don’t miss how she rolls her eyes at him. She’s done that several times, but the smile he’s put on her face has remained despite his many antics. If anything, it’s only gotten wider.

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“He’s telling the truth,” I say.

“You were on that chase?” Finley asks.

I try to hide my shock that she’s finally addressing me directly by keeping my eyes on the road. “That’s how Joey and I met.”

“He speaks facts, Fin-Fin.”

“I never saw you on any of the streamed chases with TT,” she says.

My grip on the steering wheel tightens at the knowledge she’s seen all my live chases. I knew she watched them and that she’s always admired what I do with my team, but I didn’t know she has continued to watch religiously while being my student and our relationship developed—or at least seen enough to know that Joey hasn’t made an appearance in the recent ones.

“I’ve organized a couple of chases with Channel 5 and had Ryker and Hawk tag along.”

“You saw the EF4 in Ironwood together?” she asks, her excitement shooting sparks of electricity under my skin. The sparks I’ve been attempting to tamper.

“Indeed. Daddy didn’t have Thor with him for that chase, so I didn’t get to be inside the tornado. But we got some good data with a sensor we taped to a fence post at the last second before we had to get out of its path. It was fucking wild!”

“I’m not your daddy, Joseph,” I groan.

Joey cackles from the backseat, loud enough that I wince. “You may not be my daddy, but you were that tornado’s daddy. God, you’re such a fucking beast. Seeing you in action, it’s like watching Mozart compose music or some shit. I can’t wait for you to see him, Fin. You’re gonna love it.”

The truck goes quiet after that last sentence, and the tension between Finley and I that had slightly subsided since Joey’s arrival tightens like a bowstring.

I see Joey bounce his gaze between the two of us in the rearview mirror, his brow furrowed in confusion. “Am I missing something?” he asks. “T-Daddy usually loves praise.”

I want to groan. He’s right; I’m not a person who shies away from praise unless it’s unfounded. But that has nothing to do with the awkward silence.

“What did I say?” Joey asks again.

I glance at Finley in my periphery. She looks uncomfortable, staring out the window at the plains of Oklahoma. I guess she’s going to let me decide how to handle this—I should be the one to do it, anyway.

“She’s already been on a chase with me,” I say.

“No shit?” Joey’s hand reaches between the seats and nudges Finley gently. “Then you know what I’m talking about!”

She exhales a breath and looks back at Joey, being sure not to look at me as she says, “He’s amazing.”

My heart thumps in my chest, and my joints ache from white knuckling the steering wheel. She's got to be lying after what happened. I almost got us killed, for fuck's sake—not my greatest moment—and this is exactly the kind of praise that's not warranted.

"I'm not that great," I voice, sharing my inner turmoil.

"Horseshit!" Joey retorts so loud it hurts my ears. "Don't get all humble on us now, Twister Tamer."

I want to argue with him, but I don't know if Finley wants to get into what happened last night right now. Joey's going to find out, anyway, when we meet up with the rest of the team, since I debriefed them late last night about everything—minus the fact I had sex with my student.

I also know my guys, and they won't let me forget I was nearly sucked up by a tornado and survived. Had I gotten a choice, I would've pretended shit was fine then told them today, but since I'd been in communication with Ezra before everything went sideways, he panicked when he couldn't get ahold of me.

Minutes after Finley and I found her totaled car about half a mile down the road, an emergency vehicle showed up. I cursed myself and took out my phone that miraculously had survived to find it blown up with missed calls and messages in our TT group chat. Ezra had been panicked that he couldn't reach me—he'd seen the storm turn unhinged and tried to warn me, but it was too late.

"Okayyy..." Joey clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth. "Tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," Finley and I say at the same time, making it obvious that something actually is going on.

Joey looks between us, and before I can say anything, Finley sighs. “We chased last night in Kansas.”

There’s a pause before Joey asks, “That EF2 in Cattle Creek?”

“Yeah.” Finley pushes a lock of hair behind her ear, hair I can still feel between my fingers from when I kissed her.

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“Wait, are you the chasers who got sucked up?”

Finley flushes, and I curse the chasing network for being so goddamn mouthy. I’m glad that it hasn’t gotten out what chasers were caught in the storm. The last thing I need is the internet and every person I know texting me asking what happened, why the great “Twister Tamer” almost got him and his student killed.

“We didn’t get sucked up,” Finley says. “We’re still here, aren’t we?”

“Well, shit! I was wondering why you two looked roughed up. Thought maybe it was from a kinky roll in the hay.”

“Joseph!” I bark. My eyes narrow at him in the rearview mirror, but not before I notice the way Finley’s mouth parts in shock. She recovers quickly and closes it before shooting a glare at both Joey and me.

He chuckles and holds up his hands. “Sorry, sorry. I’m only teasing. Didn’t mean to make you both uncomfortable.”

“Sure you didn’t,” she chides, though I can hear a lightness in her voice. I know it’s there because she doesn’t want Joey to get suspicious. And truthfully, I don’t know if he was serious or just being Joey.

I got to know him fairly well during our chases with Channel 5. He thrives on teasing and being, well, Joey. Normally, I find him funny and a bit charming, but not when his antics have to do with Finley. It makes me think we’re being too obvious, and I take a mental note to pull her aside later and talk with her. If we’re going to get

through this chase, we can't continue on like this, even if I'm the one who made it this way.

Joey chuckles at Finley then pops his head between our seats like a gopher. "Are you going to tell me what it was like?! I mean, hell, you two survived a twister and lived to tell the tale!"

"Windy," Finley says.

Joey hoots and smacks his leg, and I can't help but smile. "Windy?!" he presses. "That's it?"

"Windy and loud."

Joey bellows harder then smacks me on the shoulder. "See, Fin, this is why Ryker here is a Tornado Daddy. If you had been with anyone else, I'd bet you'd be in Oz by now. His striking good looks made that Wicked Witch go easy on you."

I narrow my eyes at him through the mirror again. "We got lucky. That's all."

"I don't know; maybe Joey's right." I dare a quick glance at Finley, mouth agape at her words. She smirks. "You are very pretty."

Joey barks and holds up his hand so Finley can smack it in a loud high-five, then he grips my shoulder and jostles me. "This weekend is going to befunnnnn. Don't you agree, T-Daddy?"

I grip the steering wheel and shake my head. "Only if you stop calling me that."

"Got it. I'll keep it to Tornado Daddy then."

Finley giggles sweetly, and once again, I'm reminded of how nice it sounds. And that Joey is the one making her laugh. Fucking Joseph.

"How do you two know each other?" I ask, both to change the subject and because the green-eyed monster in me needs to know if there was ever something between them. They are very relaxed around one another. It could mean they're good friends, but it could mean something else, too.

"Sharkie and I were college pals."

I eye Joey in the rearview again, and he's smiling like he knows why I'm asking. Or maybe I'm simply paranoid.

"We were lab partners our freshman year and found out we were both into storm chasing," Finley says.

I shouldn't be jealous of that, but I am. A part of me wishes I'd known Finley then. That I was in Joey's shoes instead of my own. It would be a lot easier for us if that were the case. There wouldn't be our age difference or the little fact that I'm her professor.

"Fin and I were partners in crime for a long time," Joey says. "Our meteorology professor hated us!"

"I'm scared to ask why."

Joey practically bounces in his seat and rubs his hands together. "Can I tell him, Fin-Fin?"

I bite my cheek at the ridiculous names he's using for her. He's like a kid hyped up on too much sugar, but Finley finds it endearing like I did before now. Once more,

jealousy licks at the back of my throat, and I attempt to push it down.

“If you must.” She sighs playfully.

Joey sticks his head between the seats again. “He was giving a lecture and said that mesocyclones always form in the forward flank downdraft region of the supercell, where the strongest updrafts occur.”

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“Which is false!” Finley sits forward in her seat, as if the moment is happening again right now. Her gumption reminds me once more of when she came to my office hours that first time and pointed out data I had missed on an old storm report.

My lip twitches with a smile. “And where do they form, Ms. Buckley?”

Joey waits for her answer with lips turned up as Finley shifts in her seat. It’s subtle, something I would’ve missed if I blinked, but I see the way her thighs squeeze together at the way I addressed her. An idiotic yet hopeful part of me wonders if she’s thinking about when I was inside her, and I swallow and bite the inside of my cheek while trying to think of something other than how good her pussy felt squeezing my bare cock.

She clears her throat. “Mesocyclones typically form in the updraft region of the supercell but not specifically in the forward flank downdraft. They usually develop in the mid-levels of the atmosphere, where there’s significant wind shear, and they’re associated with the updraft, not the downdraft.”

I nod, her science-speak not helping the boner that wants to make an appearance. God, I’m so fucked. “Very good,” I manage to rasp out.

“If you were wondering why I call her Sharkie, that’s why. She’s a killer.”

Finley repositions and leans closer to me, her warm body near enough that I can smell the faint almond scent of her soap and shampoo. Instead of touching me, not that she had a reason to, she pats Joey on the head. He gets all puppy-eyed, clearly enjoying her touch. When she starts to scratch under his chin like a person would a dog, he

pants.

She eyes me as she says, “And this is why I call him Sparkie.”

He bats her hand away but barks at her, and I can’t stop the ache in my chest that develops as they both prove their closeness further.

I grip the wheel harder and try to cut off the irrational feelings I have no right to feel. I should be glad that Finley has Joey on this trip—she’s already more comfortable having him here. And I’m sure she’ll be thankful that he’s with us when we meet up with the rest of the team so she has someone familiar to lean on. But part of me wanted to be that for her, even if I’ve already fucked up that chance. Even though I know it’s better this way.

“Hey, Tornado Daddy,” Joey interrupts my spiral. “Hawk knows you’re driving, so he dropped me a line.” Joey holds up his phone so I can see it in the rearview.

“What is it?”

“The team is moving further west to where they think the action is going to be. The Storm Prediction Center has reiterated that today is gonna be insane.”

“Were those their exact words?” Finley asks.

Joey smacks his lips. “They said it’s going to be unprecedented. Better?”

“Much,” Finley says with satisfaction, her tone only solidifying why Joey calls her “The Shark”.

“Tell him we’ll be there as fast as we can,” I say.

Joey types a message out then pats me on the shoulder a moment later. “He says to step on it, Daddy.”

“His exact words?” I parrot Finley’s words, a move that makes her smile softly.

“No. But I thought Daddy was better than Grandpa.”

Finley expels a belly laugh, and I grumble. “Hold on to your balls, Joseph.”

He smirks at me. “Don’t you mean hat?”

I answer by turning up the music I had on low, and “Nothin’ But a Good Time” by Poison blasts through the speakers before I punch the gas, sending Joey flying back against his seat.

Grandpa, my ass.

Chapter ten

Finley

Nerves kick up in my stomach as we get closer to the gas station where the rest of the team is waiting for us under a green sky. With the change in location, our three-hour drive turned into six. The very unglamorous part of storm chasing is that you actually have to chase them, which generally means lots of monotonous driving before you get to the good part.

Thankfully, the tension in the truck eased a bit after we listened to some music and settled in together. But mostly, we have Joey’s chatter to thank for the better atmosphere, and I’ve enjoyed catching up with him. I wouldn’t say we lost touch after we graduated from undergrad together, but our social media DMs had gotten

less frequent as we both got busier.

I glance at Ryker from the corner of my eye. I would've thought by now he'd have loosened up a bit more. His shoulders have relaxed some, but I've spent enough time with him in the last year to know he's on edge. And I haven't missed the way his jaw tightens when Joey pops his head through the seats to tell me a joke that makes me laugh.

I definitely didn't miss his fiery glare directed at my friend when we stopped for a bathroom break and to grab some greasy gas station food. Joey had slung his arm around my shoulders as we walked through the store together. It didn't mean anything to me—Joey and I long ago established that we were friends. The man is simply touchy-feely.

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I happen to know he tends to go for men more than he does women, even if he's an "equal-opportunity Southern boy" as he told me once. A fact I'm not sure Ryker is aware of—and if he is, he doesn't show it. By the grumbles and short answers he's been giving Joey, one would think he dislikes the younger man—yet it doesn't seem to bother Joey. He just keeps on ribbing him and calling him Tornado Daddy.

I try to keep my face neutral and pull out my phone.

"How's Mother Nature looking, Fin?" Joey asks.

I study the reflectivity and velocity radar maps on my app before responding. "We haven't reached severe yet, but we're heading in that direction."

Joey leans forward and studies my phone. "Hot dang! Those numbers look beautiful."

He pauses for a moment before pointing to a cell that's not far from us.

"Got some clear signs of organization here." He leans back and claps his hands together. "We're gonna have a good time."

"Be prepared to hustle at a moment's notice," Ryker says.

I turn my focus from the radar to the profile of my serious professor, who's normally not so serious. I remember one class where he turned on the movie *Twister* and passed out popcorn from the vending machine because he thought it would be more fun than learning for the day. That is not the man sitting next to me right now.

Ryker looks at us briefly as he puts his blinker on to turn into the gas station parking lot.

“Stretch your legs, and if either of you need to use the bathroom, now is the time.”

Joey salutes. “You got it, Dad.”

I hold back another laugh but don’t look to see Ryker’s reaction. Not because I don’t want to, but because I’m distracted by the massive armored vehicle and two men that come into view.

“Thor.” Joey takes the words out of my mouth. “Holy shit, ‘tis a thing of beauty.” He smacks Ryker on the arm.

Ryker’s lip twitches into a smile, and his eyes crinkle around the corners. Figures the first real smile I’ve seen from him since yesterday is because of a vehicle.

“Wait till you see it up close,” he says, the giddy inflection I’m used to hearing when he talks about what he loves returning.

Joey lets out a low whistle as Ryker slows near Thor, catching the attention of the other team members. I immediately recognize them from Ryker’s chase videos: Ezra, his communications lead—or “The Pulse” as the internet calls him—and Hawk, whose real name is Diego, his researcher/data analyst and longtime college friend.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach now that I’m finally here. All thoughts of what happened between Ryker and I last night leave my mind, and the thrill of the chase enters my body, lighting me up from the inside to the point I feel like I must be glowing. This feeling is why I signed up for this in the first place—I just have to remember that every time Ryker pisses me off.

“Hawk and Ezra are going to take my truck, and the three of us will be in Thor for the time being,” Ryker says as he comes to a stop. “Get your gear out of the back but leave anything you need for the motel tonight in the truck.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” Joey salutes and then pops open the door. The sound of him greeting Hawk reaches my ears as I move to exit, but a hand on my thigh stops me. I gasp from the contact, but it’s gone as soon as it was there.

“Sorry,” Ryker says, squeezing his eyes shut. “I didn’t—” He exhales.

“It’s fine.” I unbuckle my seat belt while the lingering burn of his touch sparks on my thigh. “Did you need something?”

He turns his body, eyes intense. “I—”

“Come on, Finley!” Joey yells through the window.

Ryker presses his lips together in dissatisfaction, but I don’t want to linger in the truck. He told me he regretted what happened, and that’s that. It’s showtime, and I need to be on my game.

I turn away from Ryker and open the door, stepping out into the heavy Oklahoma air. There’s a light wind, but the storm is far enough away from this location that there’s no rain or extreme winds.

Joey pulls me into him and walks us to the two smiling men. I shouldn’t be starstruck, but much like the first time I saw Ryker standing in front of the lecture hall earlier this year, my mind goes blank.

“This is Finley,” Joey says, dropping his arm.

Hawk steps forward first, reaching out his hand. Like Ryker, he's a handsome older man. Rugged and tall, sun-kissed skin, dark-brown hair, a well-trimmed mustache and scruff.

“Nice to meet you, Finley, I’m Diego. But as you may know, you can call me Hawk. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

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I put my hand in his and hope I'm not blushing. "All good things, I hope."

"Ryker would never say anything bad about you."

If I wasn't blushing before, I am now. Apparently, my professor likes to talk about me when I'm not around. It's kind of sweet—but it doesn't stop me from thinking about our relationship that's gone south in less than twenty-four hours.

Hawk drops my hand with a smirk and continues, "The only person he ever says anything bad about is Joey."

"Hey!" Joey whines. "What did I ever do to him?"

The group collectively chuckles like they have some inside joke, and Ezra steps forward. His smile is charismatic, and he's taller than Diego by a few inches, making him the tallest in the group. His complexion is a light brown, his short, deep auburn-colored hair is curly, and his beard is trimmed close to show off the diamond planes of his face.

"Nice to meet you, Finley. I'm Ezra."

"Nice to meet you, too." I stare into friendly brown eyes that are a similar shade to mine and shake his hand. A second later, he steps back, and Ryker approaches the group with a bag in his hand, moving next to Joey.

"Well, if it isn't the man with nine lives," Ezra says, skin wrinkling near the corners of his eyes.

I shove my hands into my jean pockets. I knew his team was aware of what happened last night—Ezra was the one who called first responders to come help us after Ryker went radio silent. We'd spent over an hour recounting what happened and getting checked out by the EMTs before a tow truck came to take away my car. I figured they'd bring it up, and I should be happy we're getting it out of the way now so we can focus on today's chase.

"We weren't even close to dying," Ryker says confidently, so confidently it makes me almost believe him. But I know he's lying through his teeth to make his team feel better, putting on the cool and collected "Twister Tamer" persona.

"You're a lucky bastard, you know that?" Hawk returns.

Ryker waves him off, but then Hawk hugs him, followed by Ezra. Joey and I watch as they pat him on the back and Ryker continues to act as if it's no big deal. I don't know whether to be pissed or grateful.

"You're lucky you found that ditch," Ezra adds.

"I'm lucky Finley is a good driver and kept a level head."

Everyone turns to stare at me, and I shift on my feet at the attention. I make eye contact with Ryker as memories of the moment before we ran from my car flood back to me along with everything else that followed. It's the last thing I want to be remembering right now.

"You both rode that beast out in a ditch? You didn't tell me that!" Joey says in awe.
"Shit!"

I break my gaze from Ryker and shrug. "You didn't ask."

The group of men all laugh at my retort, cutting the air of seriousness.

“You’re going to fit right in, Finley,” Ezra says.

The faraway sound of thunder rumbles, and the five of us look out to the building storm cell in the distance. The sky here is green yet calm, but I can see plumes of ominous dark-gray clouds and a wall of rain where the cell is located.

“I’m going to get my gear ready,” Joey says, walking off to the back of the truck.

“How’s everything looking, Hawk?” Ryker asks.

“No tornadoes on the ground yet.” He waves for us to follow him to Thor, where he has a computer open and resting on the top of it. He pulls it off and hands it to Ryker. My professor watches it for a minute then studies the sky.

“Storm is going through the motions,” Ezra adds while doing something on his phone. “I posted the cell’s location before you got here to social media, and we’re already getting responses and good pictures from the area. Looks like we’ve got a mesocyclone initiating to the north.”

Ryker observes the image then looks back at the radar before gesturing for me to study it. “What cluster do you think we should head toward, Ms. Buckley?”

I don’t miss how Hawk and Ezra seem surprised that he’s referred to me formally, but I shake it off, not wanting to make it obvious that something has happened between the two of us—or that I’m feeling nervous. I don’t want them to doubt me or why I’m here.

I look at the radar before I step away from the group and tilt my head up at the sky, closing my eyes. I sense the men’s collective stare on my back, watching me. I inhale

a breath, not only to calm myself but also to tap into my gut, something I should've done yesterday instead of jumping right into the chase with Ryker like an eager schoolgirl. While I don't have some magic storm barometer, sometimes if you stop and listen, Mother Nature will give you instructions.

I open my eyes and feel the wind on my face, the air almost muggier and hotter to the north. After another breath, I turn and face the group, confidently putting my shoulders back. "I think we should go to the north."

A small smile that makes my stomach flip tugs at Ryker's lips, and both Hawk and Ezra look impressed.

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“You think it’s our storm?” Ryker asks.

“I do. We can always punch south to the cluster developing in the south/southeast,” I say, referring to what I saw on the radar.

Ryker nods. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Come on, Hawk,” Ezra says, taking the computer from Ryker’s hands. “Let’s go get set up in Ryker’s truck. I have a feeling we’ve got minutes before this thing lights up.”

The two men walk off and Ryker watches them go. With the team no longer near us, I awkwardly stand near my professor.

After a moment, he clears his throat. “You’re comfortable navigating and spotting, right?”

I put my hands in my pockets. “Yes, of course.”

He nods. “Great.”

“Great.”

After another awkward pause, Ryker gestures for me to look at the armored vehicle. The thing is massive and not attractive by any means. But it was made for a purpose: to let its occupants be inside a tornado and collect data without getting hurt. It’s like a lab on wheels.

“Did you watch the video I sent you and Joey on how to operate everything?”

“Yes, of course.” Like I hadn’t already seen the YouTube video on it a million times prior. Thor’s been in action for a couple of years now and has successfully intercepted and survived being in the direct path of three tornados.

It can hold up to five people inside in harnessed seats. Thor, which is a heavily modified truck, is covered in a shell of three-quarter-inch steel. On top of that, it has a Kevlar coating, which will allow debris to bounce off the vehicle, making it bulletproof. It also has double windows Ryker speciallydesigned, ensuring that if debris breaks through the first layer, we’ll be protected by the second.

It’s astonishing that something that looks like a massive ugly black shoe has such an immense and important purpose. Not to mention, I’ll be very happy to be inside of this instead of in a ditch.

Ryker’s lip twitches as if he wants to smile. “Just checking.” He walks to the passenger door, and I follow.

“As you watched, everything on this is custom built to the point you’d never know this used to be a truck. When we get to the point of interception, we’ll close the double window system, lower Thor, and drive the spikes into the ground to keep us from moving. We’ll have Joey fly the drone out from the top hatch before we have to close everything up.”

Excitement itches beneath my skin as he talks. I know there’s part of me that should logically be scared about being inside a tornado again after yesterday, but I’m not. Was it terrifying? Yes. Did my car and camera get destroyed? Yes. But I’m alive, and when I decided to start storm chasing, I knew the risks. It’s also why I have good insurance across the board and eat ramen noodles a lot of days to ensure I can afford it.

I've given up a lot to be at this point in my life and career, and I'm not going to let what happened yesterday dictate how I feel about doing what I love for a living. We just have to be smarter so it doesn't happen again. And now that Ryker and I have a whole team, we've got more eyes and ears on the ground with us to prevent bad things from happening.

Besides all that, what happened to us was a crazy fluke.

When Ryker had gotten hold of Ezra, he'd explained that the tornado had rapidly intensified as it encountered a strong low-level jet, which injected additional momentum into its rotation. The unstable atmosphere and high moisture content fueled its growth, causing it to gain speed and shift direction quickly, leaving us no time to get out of there. It was a stupid mistake being as close as we were in the first place without a vehicle like this, and while I know Ryker blames himself, it's my fault, too. I think we were both caught up in more than the chase of the storm.

"Finley?"

My eyes refocus to find Ryker staring at me, face full of concern. "Yeah?"

He studies me, and my skin prickles like it always does when his attention is fully on me. "Feeling okay?"

"Never better."

It looks like he wants to ask if I'm sure, but he makes the smart choice and doesn't. "Step back; I'm going to open the doors."

Sheepishly, I realize he probably already told me to do this once, and I didn't respond. I step back, and he hits a button while he starts telling me about the lift system. The doors make the sound of decompressing air and pop up like a bird

getting ready to fly.

“Fucking bad ass!” Joey chimes in as he joins us. “Going to feel like a superhero riding around in this thing.”

I smile at him as he sidles up next to me while Ryker turns his attention to him. “You will,” he says.

The men grin like fools as Ryker continues to show us all the buttons that were clearly outlined in the video, but it’s good he reviews it. There are a lot of buttons on the front dash and above the windshield. He also shows us how to hook our harnesses and open and close the windows. Then he explains that I’ll be sitting in the passenger seat next to him, and Joey will be in one of the two seats behind us. There’s another single one behind that, so we could fit Hawk and Ezra, but they’ll be in the truck to analyze data and call for help if we need it.

When Ryker’s finished with the inside, he takes us to the back, popping open the trunk to show us the gear that Ezra and Diego must have loaded. There are a couple of cases and a pile of bright orange-and-yellow rockets, and I see another small case that looks like the one I kept my camera in until yesterday.

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My stomach aches at its loss. It was expensive, and I don't know when I'll be able to replace it. I've resigned myself to using my old camera, which will still get the job done but will impact the quality of pictures I can take this weekend.

“Yes! The rockets!” Joey squeals.

He reaches to grab one, and Ryker bats his hand away, picking one up himself and holding it out for us both to see. “I went over these with both of you separately, but beyond our normal data collection, this is what this weekend is all about.”

Ryker hands it to me, and Joey pouts. I run my fingers along the smooth shaft imprinted with the TT logo on it.

“We want to get data from aboveground, in the heart of the tornado. That puppy right there is going to help us do that.”

“It's really going to punch through the sinking air on the outside of the tornado?” I ask.

“That's the hope.” Ryker smiles, the love for what he does palpable in this moment. “We've been working for eight years to figure out something like this. The specialized sensor that Hawk designed is inside the nose cone and attached to a parachute. The difficult part is that we need to be a quarter mile away from the vortex when we launch and send it right in the inflow notch of the supercell. Once that happens, we can directly intercept with Thor and collect data from the base with the subsonic sensor.”

“If anyone can get it done, it’s you,” Joey says.

“He’s right,” I echo.

Ryker takes the rocket back from me and studies it fondly before handing it to Joey, who smiles excitedly.

“It’s going to be all of us. We’re going to have to work together as a team,” Ryker says.

“Good thing you have the best of the best, then,” Joey replies.

Ryker bounces his gaze between us, and then his eyes drop down to Joey’s chest. His eyes narrow as he huffs. “You were serious?”

Joey smirks, handing the rocket back to Ryker so he can hold out the front of his shirt. “I’m surprised it took you so long to notice.”

A snort of laughter breaks through my lips when I see what’s vexing my professor. In the time Joey walked away and came back, he removed the button-up he had on and is showing off the custom T-shirt he had made—or maybe he made it himself. It has a collage of different images of Ryker’s face from chases over the years with “Tornado Daddy” printed over the top of it.

“You like it, Fin-Fin? I have more in different designs. I thought we could all wear them and take a family photo with T-Daddy in the middle.”

I stifle another laugh as Ryker crosses his arms over his chest. “Take it off.”

Joey smirks. “Okay.” He grips his hands at the bottom of his shirt and pulls it up and over his head just as Hawk and Ezra walk up beside us.

“Damn, Joey. You work out for breakfast, lunch, and dinner?” Ezra chuckles playfully.

“Gotta keep up with Tornado Daddy somehow,” he volleys back, eyes making contact with Hawk instead of Ryker.

The older man’s face is neutral, but a moment ago, it wasn’t. I don’t think anyone noticed except me. But I saw the way Hawk’s warm gaze appreciated Joey’s six pack and rested on the V of his hips. It was brief, but it was there.

Joey flexes his arms while maintaining eye contact with him, which makes Hawk look away. The action only spurs a new curiosity over them. Maybe I’m not the only one who’s gone outside professional bounds with someone on this team? Unless I’m completely reading into it given my own situation...

All the same, I find the interaction interesting.

“Alright, alright.” Ryker huffs. “Put your shirt back on, Joseph.”

“You told me to take it off.”

Ryker fixes him with the stern look of a parent scolding his kid again, and Joey relents, putting the shirt back on.

“God, that’s great.” Ezra’s chest shakes as he eyes the shirt. “When he showed it to me and Hawk before he walked over, I told him you’d hate it.”

Hawk grins. “Joey, I think you should get one in every color.”

“Good idea!” Joey holds his shirt out proudly, making everyone but Ryker laugh again.

“It’s not funny.” Ryker groans.

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Ezra pats him on the back. “Personally, I think it’s better than Twister Tamer.”

“You’re the one who coined it.” Ryker gripes.

“Correction: the internet did. I simply perpetuated it. I like this one better.”

Joey pumps his fist in triumph. “That’s what I’m talking about! Think of all the money you could make and the funds you’d bring in for research.”

“He’s right, you know,” Ezra adds.

Ryker growls at Ezra, but despite his annoyance, there’s a playful undertone. “Do not encourage him.”

Ezra’s grin grows wider, turning mischievous. “Let me get a pre-order up, and I’ll put it online—”

“Jesus, no!” Ryker grouses. “If you all don’t stop, I’ll make everyone call me Professor West the rest of the weekend.”

Fire lights in my belly, and I look down at my feet in hopes I haven’t turned red. What I actually want to do is look at him and say, “Really?” but obviously, I’m not going to do that. The goal is to not bring attention to our plight.

When I finally collect myself and meet his gaze, I catch Joey watching me with a strange look, just like he did earlier. From the not-so-subtle comments and glances he made on the drive, I think he really does suspect that more than surviving a tornado

happened between me and Professor West. At least now if he brings it up, I can turn the tables and ask him about Hawk.

“It’s happening!” Ezra yells as all of our phones start going off with emergency alerts. “The storm in the north went severe; let’s go, boys.” Then he turns to me. “And woman.”

I shake my head and smile. “Let’s go.”

Everyone kicks into high gear. Joey hops into the backseat of Thor while the other guys head to Ryker’s truck. I move toward the truck as well so I can get my bag from the back, but Ryker stops me with a gentle hand on my wrist. I gaze down at where his skin touches mine, my heart rate kicking up, then look up and glance around. Nobody is paying attention to us, and he lingers a moment longer than he should before dropping his hand.

“What is it?” I ask.

He points to the hard case in the back of Thor and then opens it. A short gasp leaves my mouth when I see almost the exact camera I lost yesterday—but this is the brand-new version. It’s stunning.

“For the one I got destroyed yesterday,” Ryker says.

My eyes snap to his, and I shake my head. “How did you get this?”

“I looked up a local store last night and had the guys pick it up this morning when they opened. Everything is ready to go for you.”

I take a tentative step forward and run my fingers over the camera. “I can’t accept this.”

“You can.”

I pull my hand back. “You know I can’t.”

Ryker takes out the camera, which already has a strap connected to it. “The pictures you take are incredible; the world deserves to see them. To see the storms you capture.”

My gut swirls, and a pang echoes in my chest. He’s seen my photos plenty of times, and more than once, we’ve gotten a little too comfortable with each other during his office hours when showing him my favorites. Most recently, nearly a month ago, I’d brought him a shoot I did of a supercell in Iowa. He’d been impressed.

We’d stayed huddled close together, our arms and thighs touching as I showed him each one until the janitor came and told us he had to kick us out and turn the lights off. Before yesterday, I’d used that memory when I was in the quiet of my apartment. I’d imagine that we’d kissed, that he’d laid me out on his desk and pressed his body into mine, made me his.

I swallow the lump in my throat and stare at the camera in his strong hands. “Ryker, I—”

“Are you two going to talk all afternoon, or are we going to show this storm who its daddy is?” Joey yells from inside Thor.

My eyes meet Ryker’s, and he holds my gaze for another beat. “The camera belongs to you,” he says. “Please, take it.”

I hold his stare with mine and then finally nod. He’s not going to take no for an answer—I can see it in his eyes. So I take it from his hands and place it around my neck. “Thank you.”

A small smile tugs at his lips when he sees me wearing it. “No thanks needed. Like I said, the world needs your photographs.” His lips part as if he wants to say more, but then Joey yells for us again, breaking our trance.

“Let’s go,” he says. “The storm is waiting.”

Chapter eleven

Ryker

“You’re not live streaming this chase?” Finley asks as she fiddles with the laptop Joey handed her once we got into Thor—it has live radar and maps on it.

“A camera in the dash is recording.” I point to it. “And Ezra is recording footage from the truck. We’ll splice it together and put it on social media later. It makes chases easier, and I didn’t want any distractions for the launch.”

Joey waves at the dash cam and shoots finger guns at it. “Hey, beautiful people!”

I push his hands away. “It’s not live, Joseph. It’s just recording.”

“I know that, Dad. I’m just giving you footage for later.” He winks at it then puts his attention on Finley. “Wave to the camera, Fin. We can’t starve the people of such a hottie.”

She huffs to herself but waves like Joey asked. The pesky jealousy that I have no right to feel bubbles up. Finley is hot—more than hot—and my possessive side doesn’t want Joey to comment on it. But I can’t say shit about it. If Joey wants to pursue Finley and she’s interested, I can’t say shit about that, either. I also can’t say shit about him flirting with her. If Finley wants him to stop, I know she’ll tell him.

Joey slaps my shoulder. “Make sure your editing team gets my good side.”

My jaw twitches. “I’ll be sure to tell Ezra.”

“Keep going down this highway,” Finley interjects calmly.

Joey sits back in his seat, and I exhale a breath, thankful for the change of subject—back to the storm—so I don’t say something stupid.

“Looks like we have a lot of options to chase if this current supercell doesn’t touch down,” she adds.

I glance at her from the side of my vision. She’s not comfortable like she was yesterday on our chase together, and I’m positive it’s because of my actions. Or maybe it’s a combination of being on her first chase with TT, nerves after our chase went wrong, and what happened between us. She also wasn’t happy about the new camera now secured around her neck with a nylon strap, even if I could see in her eyes that she wanted it.

Knowing her, I figured she’d object to the replacement and try to give it back. I’ve learned enough about Finley in the last year to know that she wouldn’t want to accept such a large gift, that she’d prefer to have paid for a new one on her own. But she works too hard already, and I’m the reason her camera is gone in the first place. No way in hell was I going to let her buy a new one.

I’m grateful the storm and Joey intervened so we had to jump into action. Had she been able to fight more, I was prepared to tell her that the meteorology department would pay for it. I even had a whole speech planned about how her photographs, as well as Joey’s drone footage, is as important as the rockets we’ll launch. Capturing good visuals of storms helps us see a lot of things that, in the moment, we can’t see when we’re chasing.

Most importantly, she’s too talented, and her photography means too much to her. I’d

be a fool not to notice how she lights up when she talks about it or shows me her photos. I wasn't going to let what happened yesterday ruin that part of the chase for her or impact her livelihood. A fact about her I probably shouldn't know but do.

After she first showed me her photos and told me she sold them online, I found her website and ordered several of her largest prints under a friend's name and hung them proudly on the walls of my home office. Is it a little creepy? Maybe. But I like having a piece of her in my home. And like I said, she's an incredible photographer. That's how I justify it. Not even Hawk knows they're hers.

"Look at that sky!" Joey cheers.

I turn off my thoughts and scold myself for losing focus. If I don't want what happened yesterday to happen again, I need to keep myself together. So I lean over the wheel and look out at the sky through the windshield.

"We need to get east of that fluff a little bit," I say, opening the double windows to get a better look at the clouds. They're part of the storm system we're chasing, but they're not dangerous. By getting east of it, we can position ourselves away from the lighter precipitation to give us a clearer view of the storm's more active, dangerous parts.

I take one of my hands off the wheel and stick it outside. Wind flows through my fingers, and the feeling of the air gives me a sense of peace. The kind of peace I only get from chasing.

Sane people would assume peace is the last thing you'd feel doing this, but I thrive here. Chasing, being inside a storm, it's where I've known I belonged since I was eight years old, the first time I experienced an EF5 tornado that nearly killed me and my family. It's a fact I don't tell many people—not for any particular reason, but my community lost a lot that day, and so did my family. We got out with our lives, but

our farm's livelihood was threatened, and our home was nearly gone.

Instead of turning to fear over storms after that, I went in the opposite direction. I became obsessed, wanting to know anything and everything about tornadoes. I wanted better warning systems, more data collected on how tornadoes work, and why they become so destructive. I wanted to stop what happened to my family and my community from happening to anyone else.

That obsession eventually led me to an obsession about all things extreme weather. Over the years, I've embraced the name Twister Tamer and have become the most respected chaser in North America, if not the world. I've not only chased tornados, but in the last few years, TT has also chased hurricanes, winter storms, and even bizarre anomalies like the derecho that hit Iowa last year.

Yesterday's tornado, while a close call, is not something that usually fazes me. I live for extreme weather, extreme situations, and the science of it all. If Finley hadn't been with me, with her life on the line, I'd be bragging about the insanity we survived until the cows came home.

I swirl my hand through the air and smile. "We hit warm air." I scoot further over the wheel and smile at what I see: long narrow bands of clouds streaking toward the storm. "Look at this inflow band."

When I sit back in my chair, I glance at Finley to witness a giddy smile overtaking her lips as she looks out the window to where I've pointed.

Joey's practically jumping up and down in the backseat. "Well, shit! Check out that spin."

"Incredible," I say. "The storm's got great rotation."

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“You can see it on radar, too!” Finley chirps, adding to the excitement growing between the three of us.

This could really be it. If a tornado touches down like I think it will, we could launch a rocket successfully and get data from both the base and the heart of the tornado on our first day out.

Joey’s phone rings in the back, and he picks it up, putting it on speaker. “What’ve you got for us, Hawk-man?”

“Ezra got some good intel from locals on social media,” Hawk says over the speaker. “If we stay on this course, I think we’ll have a much better view of the supercell.”

As he speaks, my eyes catch an elongated cloud, an indicator of a developing tornado. “We got a little cigarette cloud!” I call, the level of my voice rising as the thrill of the chase builds.

Hawk continues. “If Finley agrees, turn right up here. I think the storm is going to line up on this north/south boundary.”

I glance at Finley as I keep driving, Joey’s eyes on her now, too. I see her nerves spike at being put on the spot. She leans forward in her seat to watch the storm through the windshield while nibbling on her bottom lip.

Normally, Finley is not so reserved with her opinions and thoughts, which is why I put her in the spotter and navigator position to begin with. I noticed she hesitated when I asked her which storm we should chase before, too. I’d thought it was because

I called her Ms. Buckley and she'd been thrown, but maybe not.

Her teeth dig into her bottom lip harder, and the urge to reach across the seat and soothe the skin is strong. But I hold the wheel, wishing I could sit on my hands. Instead, I use my words.

"Take a look at the radar for the hook echo." I smile softly, using what I'd call my professor tone. Encouraging, friendly. "Then watch for the visual cues the storm is giving you."

Finley's shoulders tense, and for a moment, I think she's angry at my help. Then she nods and studies the radar before looking back out at the storm.

"The storm we're currently chasing still has good rotation on it. I think if we go all the way east to Red Rock Junction, we can keep this storm as well as the other cells in play if this one fizzles. That way, we eliminate all risk."

My smile is soft as pride swells in my chest. The desire to praise her sparks in me, but Joey beats me to it. "Fuck yeah!" Joey shouts. "I like the way you think, Fin."

I clear my throat, the words I like it, too on the tip of my tongue, but I keep my mouth shut and hit the gas, taking Finley's direction.

Chapter twelve

Finley

Ryker's help just now and Joey's words of praise only do so much to quell the nervous feeling in my stomach.

While it felt nice to have the comfort of my professor's words, making things more

normal between us like they were before yesterday, the weight of my new camera hangs heavy around my neck. Since he gave it to me, my brain hasn't stopped spinning an endless spiral. It's coming across as nervousness over the chase alone—which is partially true; there is a natural nervousness to being here, living out a longtime dream of mine—but that's not all it is.

I'm questioning everything about why I'm here and even how well I've done in Ryker's classes this last year, wondering if my grades were influenced by our blurred-line relationship. Did Ryker only ask me on this chase because he's attracted to me? I didn't exactly question it before, but now, it's all I can think about. Especially with his gift hanging around my neck.

God, he wouldn't do that, would he?

I grit my teeth, wishing I would've stopped myself from crossing that line yesterday, truly understanding Ryker's regret in a way I didn't allow myself to think about before because I was hurt and angry.

Had he swept me up into his arms afterward and said he wanted to be with me like we're in some fairytale, what would that have looked like? Would he be touching me around the guys? Told them we were seeing each other? What would the team think of me then? I hate that I'm thinking about this—if I was a man, I don't think I would be.

I turn my head to gaze out the window in an attempt to collect myself as Ryker speeds toward the storm. As I stare at the supercell, the dark clouds rotating in the distance, I think of all the hard work and sacrifice it's taken for me to be here. The long hours working shitty jobs and late nights chasing storms to take photos so I could not only pay for school but simply pay to exist.

I can hear Jake telling me to “quit spiraling and know my worth,” but no matter what I say to myself, I can't stop the nagging feeling that maybe this has all been a lie.

That I've ruined everything by letting my ovaries fog my brain with stupid hormones and feelings.

"You okay, Fin-Fin?" Joey asks, his toothy grin from the thrill of the chase now fading.

I force a smile, feeling the weight of Ryker's gaze as his eyes flick between the road and the storm. I need to get it together and prove to myself and this team that I deserve to be here—not that the guys have given me any reason to think that I need to prove myself.

They did listen to me twice now and asked for my opinions. I can't let that change. I need to let go of what happened between me and Ryker and be a fully functioning member of the team like I told myself I'd be this morning.

"Yeah, great."

I must not be convincing because Joey doesn't let up. "Do you get car sick?" He pops his arm through the seats like he kept doing on the drive down here then places his hand on my forehead as if being carsick would give me a fever. "T-Daddydoesdrive like a maniac."

I push his hand away and shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

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“Ms. Buckley, if this is too much after yesterday, please let me know,” Ryker says.

A minute ago, he was acting like my professor, helping me with soft direction until I decided what route we should take, but this statement upsets me. I hate not only the tone he used but everything about it as well. His words make me feel as if I can’t handle being here, as if I’m weak. I also hate that he’s saying it in front of Joey. It’s embarrassing, and I’m glad Hawk is no longer on the phone to hear it.

I turn my focus to my idiot professor, leveling him with my best glare. Even with access to only his profile, I can see his forehead is pinched and his hands have a death-grip on the wheel like he did for almost the entire drive to Oklahoma.

“Is it too much for you, Professor West?” I fire back.

“Ooooh,” Joey says under his breath. Then I think he mutters something to the effect of don’t piss off the Shark, but I’m too annoyed right now to know for sure.

“It would make sense for you to be nervous after what happened. Yesterday was intense,” Ryker adds, ignoring my question.

If Joey wasn’t in the car, I’d probably ask him if he meant the storm or his dick buried in his student’s pussy, but that wouldn’t help either of our situations—or my raging thoughts of inadequacy. I’m also highly aware that the dash camera is recording. I send a quick prayer in thanks that this isn’t being broadcasted live to his one-million followers.

“I’m not nervous.” At least not about the storm.

“It’s okay if you are,” Ryker prods.

My hands grip the edge of the laptop I’m holding, and I swallow down the frustrated noise that’s building in my throat. I wonder: If Joey was the one trapped in the storm with him yesterday, would he be this concerned? Or would they be talking about how it was the coolest thing that’s ever happened to them?

I look back down at the radar to ease the frustration that’s now simmering toward anger. I hate that Ryker, my biggest cheerleader and mentor, is part of the reason I’m even questioning myself—and his reasons for picking me to be here, for that matter. If we get the chance to be alone, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind and tell him to start acting normal.

“I’m good, I promise.” My voice manages to come out level, and I even smile at Joey before pointing ahead. “Take this dirt road here, then we should hit a paved road.”

Ryker doesn’t push the subject further—thank god—he just turns the wheel as Joey rubs his hands together, finally placated. “This has gotta be the storm. I feel it in my knees,” he says.

A laugh bursts out of me, and I’m grateful for the release. “Your knees?”

“Yeah. My joints start aching when a good one is coming.” Joey waggles his eyebrows in a flirty way, and I’m once again glad he’s here. He always knows how to ease tension and make things light, a trait I once attributed to Ryker. Had we not had sex, I think he’d be acting like the man on his live chases or during class instead of this stick-up-his-ass version of himself.

I’ve seen small glimpses of his true self, like when he grinned at Joey over Thor and the superhero reference or when he hugged Ezra and Hawk after we arrived. Even that comment a moment ago that helped me through my nerves. But mostly he’s

been, well...this downgraded version of himself.

“Hey!” Ryker yells, surprising both me and Joey. “Look at that ripper—it’s a funnel cloud for sure, there in the center. Do you both see it?”

I lean forward in my seat, and rain starts to hit the windshield as I look out. My heart thumps faster, and I rein in my sour emotions—I’m going to stay focused on what matters.

“I see it,” I say.

“Me, too,” Joey adds. “I think it’s getting ready to go berserk.”

“Holy shit.” Ryker’s voice changes to awe, sounding more like his Twister Tamer persona. My heart beats even faster now. “Get ready to launch your drone, Joey.”

“Woohoo, hoo, hoo-wee!” Joey hollers as a cell phone rings again. This time, it’s Ryker’s phone, and he connects the call through Thor’s Bluetooth speaker.

“Talk to me,” he says.

“There could be a tornado nearly above us—you see those rain curtains?” Hawk says.

“Copy that,” Ryker responds, gaze flashing to mine.

I know what he’s doing: checking to make sure I’m not freaking out at the prospect of a tornado almost on top of us. But I didn’t need Hawk to tell me that information; I was about to say the same thing. I think Hawk is used to being in my position instead of in the truck behind—not that I mind. It’s good to have this many eyes on a storm. Often, a chase team works collectively instead of sticking to their roles one-hundred-percent, especially where spotting is concerned. I’m sure Ryker and Joey also knew.

“Keep going down this road,” I say, threading as much confidence into my voice as possible. “That paved one you need to take a right on should be coming up. Be aware of traffic and maybe other chasers.”

Ryker focuses back on the road, and I think I see a bit of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Not sure what that’s about, but I’m not going to let myself care.

“Hawk boy, you got your rocket ready?” Joey asks as gets his drone set.

“My rocket is always ready,” Hawk retorts.

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I dare to look at Joey, who's blushing as he chuckles. "Good to hear. Make sure it doesn't go off prematurely," he teases.

My chest shakes with laughter as Hawk ends the call. There's definitely something going on between them, and I can't wait to ask Joey about it later.

The paved road comes into view, and sure enough, there are some other chasers around. We send them a wave as we turn on the road and continue to haul ass to where we think the tornado will drop. The closer we get to the storm, the heavier the rain becomes, and the wind picks up speed.

"Look at the right side of it," I say, on the edge of my seat figuratively and literally. "I think we're going to get a touchdown soon."

In the distance, only a couple of short miles away, an open farm field starts to swirl with dirt and debris. The dark wall cloud above it is telling me that I'm right.

"Look at that intense motion," Ryker says, voice breathy and reverent.

Goosebumps break out over my arms, and I start to vibrate in my seat. This is it—another tornado. We're lucky that we're getting one out on our first chase today, which makes me wonder how many more we'll come across tonight. It's more common for tornadoes to touch down in the afternoon or evening because the sun has had time to heat the ground, creating the necessary instability in the atmosphere to produce severe storms—specifically, tornadoes.

"I think this road is perfect for launch," Ryker says. "Do you agree, Ms. Buckley?"

I ignore the formality and observe the storm. “Yes, I think so.”

“Holy fuck!” Joey bounces. “It’s happening!”

“I’m opening the hatch above you, Joey!” Ryker yells over the growing noise of the wind through his open window. “Launch your drone.”

“Anything for you, T-Daddy!”

Ryker grins, and it makes me happy to see him be nicer to my old friend. From the driver’s seat, he presses a button, opening the hatch above the back seat. Rain falls in, getting mostly on Joey but splashing on me and Ryker, too.

Joey laughs, giddy in his excitement. He slips on his goggles, ready to pilot the drone, and effortlessly launches it through the hatch into the stormy sky with his controller. “Fuck, this never gets old,” he says. “It’s like having a front-row seat every time.”

I grin widely as I look at the storm, balancing the laptop on my legs and opening my window. The gifted camera around my neck still feels heavy with unanswered questions, but it’s mine now; I may as well use it. It would be a shame not to, right?

I fiddle with the buttons, quickly adjusting the focus and exposure before aiming it out at the developing tornado.

“That’s a textbook wall cloud,” I say with an awe similar to what Ryker had in his voice a moment ago. I snap a few pics then pull back. “Professor West, speed up.”

His head snaps to mine, and I’m not sure if it’s because I called him “professor” or because I’m telling him to hurry.

“It’s on the ground!” I yell, pointing to the left.

He follows my finger. “Hell yeah, it is.” The enthusiasm laced in his deep voice makes my toes curl. It strikes me that I’m living my dream right now: I’m on a chase with Tempest Trackers and I’m giving directions, the very image I’ve dreamt about and manifested nearly every day since I was a teen.

Ryker West is next to me, Ezra and Hawk are behind us, and one of my friends is in the back seat. I’m here, right now. And there’s a tornado in front of us.

Holy crap!

My earlier spiral floats away like a distant memory, and I watch as the tornado gains strength. Currently, it looks almost like a rotating dust cloud that’s dropped from an ethereal mass of dark gray clouds above it. But as it starts to condense, it takes on the tightened shape of what we call a “drill bit”—wide at the top and narrow at the bottom.

“Look at the motion on that, look at the motion!” Ryker exclaims.

“Yeehaw, baby!” Joey hoots. “So fucking pretty.”

“We’re catching it. This one is it!” Ryker adds.

Extreme elation builds between us until it feels as if Thor is going to explode from our energy alone.

“This footage is fucking epic, y’all. Wait till you see!” Joey yells. “I bet Hawk and Ezra are freaking out. It’s so good!”

I’m sure they are, because this kind of moment is what chasers live for, no matter how many times we witness it.

The tornado is in a field on the left side of the road, swirling and twisting, the base of it getting bigger as it stays on the ground. It's probably no more than a mile and a half away.

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“Here we go, here we go!” Ryker yells louder. “It’s spiraling all the way up the base.”

“Oh my god,” I whisper, eyes wide with wonder. The tornado rolls south. It should cross the road in front of us, if not on top of us. But that’s what we want.

“We got it, we got it!” Ryker chants.

I snap another picture of the howling beast as the debris field around the tornado gets larger. “Pull off here,” I say.

Ryker doesn’t question me, and I won’t deny that it makes my stomach contract that he’s listened to me again, especially at this intense moment.

“I’m pulling back the drone so I don’t lose it!” Joey yells as we come to a stop.

“Heard,” Ryker says as he unbuckles his seatbelt. He pushes a button, and the lift system activates the doors, popping them open. Ryker is out of the car before I can blink, and I quickly follow.

Rain pours down on us, but it’s not enough to soak our clothes, and wind whips my hair across my face. I snap several more photos as I stand in reverence of the phenomena that almost took my life yesterday. I should probably be scared—a normal person would be—but I’m not. I’m pumped and know I’m going to remember this moment for the rest of my life.

A car door slamming turns my head in the direction of Hawk and Ezra, who have

pulled up behind us. They get out of Ryker's truck with full-faced smiles on and approach us through the whipping wind.

Ezra has his phone held up in front of him, talking to it as if he's live on social media, and Hawk clutches one of the rockets Ryker showed us earlier in his hands.

"We've got a clear spot coming around!" Ryker yells over the roaring sound of the tornado nearing closer, less than a mile away now. My ears start to pop from the changing pressure, and the wind becomes stronger.

"We should launch," Hawk says, handing the rocket he's holding to Ryker. "I took one from the back of Thor earlier; I had something I wanted to tweak. It should do what we need it to do if the inflow band takes it up."

The two men, longtime friends and colleagues, share a look that's hard to put into words—one filled with joy, love, thrill, and maybe even relief. As Ryker said, this moment has been a long time coming. If it works, it won't only be significant for them but for the entire field of meteorology.

I understand the weight of it, and I send a silent prayer that everything goes smoothly. And that I didn't pick the wrong storm to chase or placement to put us in, though I'm sure Ryker knew this was the right choice, too, or he wouldn't have agreed or pulled over.

A moment later, Joey steps out of Thor sans goggles and drone, but he's wearing the goofiest of grins, like he just came down from the best high of his life.

"Holy hell!" he hollers. "That was great! Now, let's shoot that rocket—fuck shit up right outta the gate!"

Ryker steps away from a laughing Hawk after he pats him once more on the shoulder.

Then he points at me.

“Ms. Buckley, you’re with me,” Ryker commands before going to the back door of Thor, the rocket now in hand.

I frown and turn to Hawk, yelling over the noise. “Don’t you want to, Hawk? It’s your baby.”

He smiles at me gently, his weathered tan cheeks lifting. “I’m the science guy—you both do your thing.”

“Come on, Ms. Buckley!” Ryker yells from inside Thor now.

My pulse skips as I call out a thank you to Hawk and rush to Ryker.

He’s in the back where Joey was before, his head and torso coming through the top of the open hatch as he starts to load the rocket onto the launch pad they’ve built on the side of the roof.

“Hawk, Ezra,” he commands loudly, his voice carrying to where they stand a foot or so from the massive vehicle’s trunk. “After we launch, you’ll both stay here with the truck to start receiving data, and the rest of us will drive in for a direct intercept to get more data from the subsonic sensors we have with us. If needed, move back a quarter mile so you’re completely in the clear.”

The men yell their agreement as Ryker’s comment reminds me I’m going to be inside another tornado in a matter of minutes.

“Step up here, and hold the shaft,” he says to me.

I attempt to stop my cheeks from turning pink at his comment and get up on the edge

of the door where there's a lip, gripping the rocket shaft. Our fingers brush as wind swirls around us, and that zap of electricity passes between us again. I'd growl at that sensation if I could. My body needs to understand that Ryker and I are no longer involved. He's my platonic professor.

His jaw tenses for a moment as if he's thinking the same thing before he looks up at the sky. "It's coming fast—we gotta launch before we lose our chance."

We stare at each other for a brief second, and in his eyes, I see a million things he wants to say. None of which I'm sure I want to even hear, nor is this the appropriate time.

"Launch it now, Ryker!" Hawk yells.

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“Is it connected on that side?” Ryker asks me.

I break our eye contact and pull my hand back from the heat of his. I do as he requests, making sure the rocket’s secure where he can’t properly see. “You’re good.”

“Step back, Ms. Buckley. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

The same words he said earlier wrap around my heart and squeeze. Their meaning holds more weight each time he repeats them, because I know he doesn’t mean just physically.

With a nod, I step down before moving to where the guys are standing just far enough away so they aren’t in the rocket’s path but still close to Thor. Joey puts his arm around my shoulders as we watch Ryker do what he was born to do.

He holds down his backward cap with one hand as the wind gusts become strong and harsh against our bodies, his head tipping back as if he’s sending a silent prayer to the tornado gods. “Launching now.”

Ryker ducks down into Thor and closes the hatch. A second later, the rocket launches into the sky with a loud pop and whooshing noise.

“Oh my god,” I mutter under my breath. “It’s going!”

The rocket goes up and up, cutting through the strong wind and toward the inflow band. The world seems to go silent as we wait, and Ryker reopens the hatch to watch

with us as it slices through the air.

Right when I think it's going to work, it takes a sharp and sudden nosedive, descending quickly toward the ground, the parachute and sensor that released dropping with it. It lands in the field in front of us, maybe one hundred yards away.

There's utter silence among us, then a loud laugh breaks through. It starts out light but builds into a belly laugh. Joey and I glance at each other with confusion before we turn our gazes to Ryker, the source of the sound.

Hawk joins in, followed by Ezra's deep chuckle.

"Well, I guess my last-minute tweak fucked it up!" Hawk yells to Ryker.

"It's okay, it got up there pretty high," he answers before getting out of Thor and joining us on the ground.

"I see where it landed," Ezra says, pointing to where I also saw it land.

"Ezra and I will get it once the storm clears," Hawk says. "The three of you go get data from the ground."

"Not going to happen," Joey says, pointing toward the sky.

The group of us follow his finger to where the tornado is quickly dissipating, the storm weakening as fast as it came. It's wild to see in person, and it's not the first time I've witnessed it. Sometimes tornadoes will fade gradually, but other times, they can go from violence to nothing in moments. It's the unpredictability of weather—reminds me a lot of humans and a certain professor of mine.

"Fuck," Ryker mutters under his breath.

“You tamed that one too hard, Tornado Daddy. Scared the shit right out of it with that rocket,” Joey chirps.

The group laughs, and Ryker smirks before he notices the way Joey still has his arm around me. Ryker’s gaze morphs to the same grumpy one he gave us when Joey had his arm around me at the gas station. I have the urge to call him out on it right here, but I show restraint for what feels like the millionth time today.

“Everything okay, Daddy?” Joey asks. I stiffen under Joey’s arm and look up at him to find he’s grinning like a sly fox.

His words shake the grumpy glare from Ryker, who forces a tight half-smile on his face. “I’m fine. Just thinking about the rocket.”

Liar.

“Let’s take some time to regroup,” Hawk suggests. “We’re in a good spot to catch a storm if another looks good, and I’ll see if I can figure out what went wrong.”

“We can grab some food at a diner near here,” Ezra adds. “I see it on maps.”

Ryker nods. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Hell yes! I could crush a greasy double cheeseburger!” Joey cheers, letting go of me and making a beeline for Thor. “But lunch is on T-Daddy!”

Chapter thirteen

Ryker

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The diner we're in is packed with people and other storm chasers we know from our years of chasing. They're all out today because of the weather across Oklahoma and Kansas, and generally, people tend to follow my team wherever we go.

The minute we drive off, I guarantee several other teams and solo chasers will follow. It used to annoy me when I was younger, but now it doesn't. I've learned to take it for what it is: a compliment to my team's skills. The only thing that does annoy me is that several chasers have tried to copy our rocket design over the years. But like us, nobody has had a successful launch.

"I think it was a faulty rocket, which we knew could happen," Hawk says as he chews on a cold leftover fry. He's been out in the truck with Joey, tinkering with the rocket that failed, while Ezra, Finley, and I ate and chatted with a few people that came up to our booth. I had hoped at some point Ezra would get up so I could talk to Finley alone, but no dice. Now she's at the counter chatting with Joey while Ezra talks to another chaser in the diner.

"I think I launched too late," I say.

Hawk swallows another fry before leaning forward in the booth. "Really?"

I fix the cap on my head and study my friend's familiar face, wondering if I should tell him the truth: that when Finley's fingers brushed mine, my brain short-circuited, and I paused a second too long, losing the moment I needed. I fucked up again because of my feelings for her.

"I wanted to believe it was the rocket at first, but—" I exhale a tight breath and allow

my eyes to find Finley at the counter. She's laughing at something Joey said, and an envy fills me. I want to be the one making her laugh and smile.

Hawk groans. "What did you do?"

I drop my gaze to the table where half of my burger sits and say nothing, giving him an answer without words. He's a smart guy; he'll put it together.

"Look at me," he says after a long pause.

I lift my head, bracing myself for the stare of disappointment or anger on Hawk's face, but instead, I find a softness in his brown eyes. Which, honestly, is worse. I was hoping he'd take me by the shirt and punch me across the face. That seems easier and more palatable than whatever the hell this look is. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do you want to know?" I counter.

Hawk presses his lips into a hard line. "I think I can guess what happened."

We stare at each other across the table, and Hawk dares a look at Finley before eyeing me again. "You've never let anyone, intimate relationship or otherwise, jeopardize your work before."

I scratch my jaw and feel shame crawl up my neck like spiders. I know I've let him down, and I've let my team down, too, including Finley. Yes, we'll have more opportunities to shoot off the rockets and collect data, and yes, that tornado dissipated faster than we would've liked, but that's not the point. If my head was in the game, not only today but yesterday as well, things would be different now. Instead, everything is shit, and I feel like a guilty asshole.

"I know." I push my plate to the middle of the table. "You warned me to keep my

distance, and I didn't listen."

"When have you ever listened to me about women?" Hawk smirks.

My lip twitches. "I listen to you."

"You're such a liar."

"In college, you told me not to date Nicole because she was a known cheater, and I didn't."

"You still slept with her."

"Like I said, I didn't date her."

He glares at me, an exasperated look I rarely see from him since we hardly ever disagree, fight, or get on each other's nerves. We've always worked well together as friends and colleagues, and we have since the day we met. Hawk and I get each other, and we know when to say something and not to say something.

It's why he warned me about Finley, because up until I met her and started talking about her a little too much, I'd never spoken or reacted to a woman quite like this before—and never a student.

Had she not been a student, he wouldn't have cared and let me do my thing. Normally, I keep my sex life simply that: a sex life. I've been leaning toward a future of being perpetually single, chasing hookups since I'm mostly on the road, teaching, or pouring over data.

With Finley, he wasn't only concerned for me and my job if anything were to happen between us but her heart, too. For better or worse, that's the kind of guy Hawk is.

Finley's laugh floats over from the counter, and I stare at her, my eyes following the length of her chestnut hair then down to the gentle curve of her ass. My hands itch to slip in the back pocket of her jeans and pull her against my chest, to feel her warm body close to mine again.

"Ryker." Hawk interrupts my daydream. This time, when I focus back on him, he does look ticked off. "What was that look about?"

I consider my next words before saying, "Let's go outside and talk."

Hawk agrees and grabs another cold fry. A few moments later, we step out of the diner, the warm late afternoon air hitting us as we walk to my truck in the parking lot. When I'm sure we're alone, I lean against the back passenger door and stare up at the sky. Once upon a time, Hawk and I would share a cigarette, but we kicked that habit many years ago, so instead, we stand in silence until Hawk speaks.

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“Tell me.”

I stick my hands in my pockets. “I think you guessed it, but Finley and I had sex.”

For a long pause, Hawk stares, then he punches my shoulder like he used to do when I said something dumb in college.

“Ouch!”

“I thought you made out or maybe got to second base, not fucked her right out of the gate. Jesus, Ryker!”

I rub my arm. “I honestly thought you’d figured it out.” Now his lack of reaction earlier makes more sense.

“I knew you could be an idiot sometimes, but I didn’t think you werethatmuch of an idiot. She’s your student, Ryker—you’re her mentor!” He hisses the last part quietly.

I grind my teeth. “Like I didn’t fucking know that? I’m beating myself up about it enough already. I know it was stupid and reckless—I told Finley as much after it happened.” Hawk punches me again, and I grunt. “What the hell was that one for?”

“You told her that?”

“Not those exact words, but she knows I regret it. I think she feels the same way.”

“You’re more than just an idiot—you’re acompleteidiot.”

“Fucking thanks. Exactly what I needed to hear from my best friend.”

Hawk runs a hand through his already disheveled hair. “That’s why I’m saying it, because I care about you.” He pauses for a second, thinking. Then he continues. “You have to know that was a stupid thing to say to her.”

I stare at him and wait, knowing he wants to say more.

He huffs out a breath. “Do you really regret what you did? Or did you say that to her to make yourself feel better?”

“Of course I regret it,” I express almost too quickly.

Hawk kicks some dirt at his feet and leans against the truck. “You’re lying to yourself, man.”

Annoyance grows in my chest. “I thought you’d be glad I shut it down.”

“You shouldn’t have had anything to shut down in the first place.”

“I know. But it just happened.” My eye twitches at the excuse. Sure, it happened, but pretending it “just happened” is a lie. Finley and I have been too comfortable with each other all year. I should’ve shut it down ages ago—but I didn’t.

“At least I know why you’ve been acting like such a dick since last night. Ezra thought yesterday was finally the thing that shook you up, but now, everything makes sense.”

“I’m not acting like a dick.”

Hawk laughs sardonically. “You’re treating Joey like trash, and you called Finley

‘Ms. Buckley’ like you’re some stuck-up scientist. You’ve also been short with me and Ezra since we talked last night.”

“I’ve been trying to remain professional.”

“Being a dick means you’re being professional?”

“You’re pissing me off, Diego.”

His eyebrows shoot up toward his hairline at my use of his legal name. We stare each other down for a long moment before my shoulders sink and I force a tense exhale.

“Have I really been that bad?”

“Joey asked me if he’d done something wrong.”

“He has a shirt with my face on it that says Tornado Daddy.”

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“Like you would’ve cared in the past, Twister Tamer?”

My fists clench. I know my anger is dumb, but I can’t stop the annoyance I feel toward my young friend over his incessant flirting with Finley, even though he’s clearly a better match for her than me. Not only are they age appropriate, he’s not her professor.

“We always rib each other,” I counter weakly.

“Ribbing and being a dick are two different things. I saw the way you glared at him in the diner—you know Joey flirts with everyone. You can’t act jealous after you told Finley you regret what happened between the two of you.”

I ignore that Hawk is somehow in my thoughts and rub the back of my neck in frustration. “She’s my student; I had to say it.”

“You’re only proving to me that you don’t regret it and that now, after it happened, you’re taking some bullshit moral high ground. Why is that?”

I clamp my eyes shut. “I almost got her killed yesterday.” The truth of it crushes around my heart, only making me feel worse about everything.

Hawk’s hand comes down on my shoulder, and he asks me to look at him again. When our eyes connect, I see his pity in them, and it makes me nauseous.

“But you didn’t—you both lived. And from what you told us, you put her life over yours and protected her the best you could. Take comfort in that.”

He squeezes my shoulder, but his words don't lessen the heaviness in my chest. "Keeping her safe still doesn't change the fact that what I did was wrong—and that she's my student."

"No, it doesn't, and that's something you've got to work out. But either way, get your head out of your ass and stop being such a dick. We need you at your best, and this is not your best."

A stubborn part of me wants to debate him, to justify my behavior further, but I know he's right. "I know," I echo my thoughts as I turn my gaze back toward the diner. I can't see Finley through the window, but I imagine her there with Joey, laughing, smiling—exactly how she was with me before yesterday.

"You really like her."

I turn back to Hawk, who's studying me like he observes radar. "It doesn't matter."

He shakes his head. "It does."

"I should apologize to Joey and Ezra," I say in an attempt to change the subject.

"Yes, but maybe talk to your girl, too."

"She's not my anything."

Hawk chuckles. "Whatever you say, Ryker. You can deny it till you're blue in the face, tell me you regret what happened, but I'll never believe it."

"Hawk—"

"I'm going to grab a coffee to go before another storm picks up speed. Figure your

shit out. Do it before the others start to ask questions and things get more uncomfortable than they already are. I'll support you in whatever you want to do—but please, stop being an idiot.”

My friend pats my back then walks off to the diner, leaving me to my thoughts. Which I'm not sure is a good thing.

Chapter fourteen

Finley

“You’ve got one yearleft of school then?” Joey asks as he adds an obscene amount of cream to his to-go coffee.

“Yeah. I thought about taking extra classes so I could graduate earlier, but I’ve been paying for everything out of pocket while helping my dad out at the farm.”

Joey nods. “College is expensive. I swear I’ll be paying undergrad loans off until the end of time. But since I’m a glutton for punishment, maybe I’ll go back and get my master’s now that I’m no longer at the station. Think Tornado Daddy would like having me in his classes?”

I snort. “Maybe. Unless you wore that shirt.”

Joey smirks and takes a sip of his nearly white coffee before placing a lid on it. “I would for sure wear this shirt and sit in the front row.”

“He’dlovethat.”

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Joey sips his coffee again then turns his body fully toward me, his gaze intense as he stares at me. After a long moment, I blush, bringing my hand up to my mouth.

“What? Do I have something in my teeth?”

He pops a hip out and places his hand on it, a slow smirk forming on his charming face that makes his dimples pop out. I start to flush under his attention.

“I need to use the bathroom,” he says abruptly.

Joey tosses money on the counter and grabs my hand, pulling me up from my seat. I let out a surprised yelp as he guides me out of the diner, brushing past Hawk on his way in. I shoot Hawk a small, puzzled smile, but his attention shifts to Joey, and I swear his cheeks flush like earlier. Before I can look closer, warm air meets my already heated skin as Joey leads me around to the side of the diner where the old bathrooms are tucked away.

“Joey!” I finally say as he tugs me again, this time inside the dingy single bathroom with chipping white walls that probably have lead paint. “Why did you bring me in here?”

He closes and locks the door without answering me then turns to face me again. “Spill it, Fin-Fin.”

I stare at my friend, the overhead light casting a yellowish glow over us. This is a very old bathroom, one that would definitely make a person lay toilet paper over the seat or hover to use it.

“Spill what?”

He grins that sly grin again. “You and T-Daddy have a thing going on.”

I bristle. “We do not.”

“That’s a big ol’ fat lie.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “And you don’t have something going on with Hawk?”

I expect Joey to balk or deny his relationship, but he grins wider, if that’s possible. “We’re having fun together. You should see his di—”

“Whoa!” I hold up my hands. “Please do not finish that sentence.”

He chuckles. “Okay, I won’t. But at least you answered my question.”

“I didn’t answer a thing.”

“Come on, Finney. You don’t have to lie to me. A tornado wasn’t the only thing you got twisted up in last night, was it?”

I press my lips together, staring into Joey’s blue eyes. They’re nothing but kind, and I don’t see any judgment in them—only his natural curiosity with a hint of playfulness.

“Is it that obvious?”

He clucks his tongue. “As obvious as sweet tea at a picnic. The man’s been glaring daggers at me since the moment I hugged you.”

I bite back a groan. I should've talked to Ryker earlier, told him he was being too obvious with his feelings for me—whatever they are or aren't. "Do you think the others know?"

He shrugs. "I asked Hawk if Ryker was angry with me to get a feel for if he knew something. I think he does—and Ezra might—but I haven't had much time with him. Besides, Hawk kept me busy with his mouth after we talked briefly so I don't know."

I smile wryly when I think of Joey's kiss-swollen lips when he came back from "examining the rocket" while the rest of us ate in the diner. I'm happy to know I'm right about him and Hawk. It also makes me feel a little better about sleeping with Ryker, even though Hawk and Joey have nothing to be concerned about. Yes, Hawk is older than him, but that doesn't matter in this circumstance.

"How long have you and Hawk had a thing?"

Joey shakes his head. "Oh no, Fin. You're not changing the subject. I want to know what's going on."

I groan. "We don't have anything going on."

"Finley—"

"Fine, I should say we don't have anything going on anymore. Ryker stopped it before it went any further than it already had."

Joey studies my face before continuing. "So you aren't together?"

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I shake my head. “We never were. Yesterday was the first time we—” I want to say crossed a line but that isn’t really true when I think about it. “The first time we acted on anything.”

“Fin—”

“I know, it was dumb. Ryker has already made it clear he regrets what happened.”

“That man doesn’t regret it.”

I almost roll my eyes. “You’re wrong about that. After we had se—” I cut myself off with a blush, making Joey grin despite himself.

“Wait, so did you, like—do it in the tornado?”

“Joey!” I laugh. “Did you really just ask that?”

He shrugs. “It’s a valid question.”

I shake my head. “You already know the answer, so stop being a lech.”

The corner of his lip tugs up. “That’s impossible for me, but in all seriousness, he doesn’t regret it. If he did, he wouldn’t be acting like a jealous man every time I touch you or look at you. He thinks I’m flirting with you to get in your pants.”

“And you’re not?” I tease.

He chuckles. “I tried a long time ago, and you shot me down. You know I’m playing with you.”

“I know you are. But he’s right to regret it. If it got out that anything happened between us, he would lose his job, and other students will think the only reason I got this chase position is because we slept together. The last thing I want is for people to think I slept my way to the top.”

Joey takes my biceps in his hands. “When have you ever given two fucks about what people think? I call you a shark for a reason. You go after what you want and fucking kill it every time.”

I cock my head at him. “Thanks, I think?”

He shakes me a little. “Do you like Ryker?”

“Of course I like him. He’s amazing at what he does, and he’s a good professor.”

Joey gives me a what the fuck? look. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

I groan. “I wouldn’t have slept with him if I didn’t like him.”

“Well, it’s obvious the man is obsessed with you.”

“He’s not—”

“He is.”

Joey drops his arms, and I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “None of it matters, Joey. In the end, it’s better if we keep the line between us drawn firm. We’re not on this chase to chase some tail, we’re here to chase storms. That’s what I need to focus

on.”

“That last part may be true, but if you like him and want more—”

“It can’t happen.”

Joey shrugs. “Again, who says?”

“The school and, of course, Ryker.”

“Taking the school out of the equation, do you really believe that about Ryker? Especially with how he’s been acting? And don’t think I didn’t notice that new camera around your neck.”

“Did you hear our conversation?”

He smirks. “Maybe.”

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I want to growl in frustration. “It’s not important. Like I said, we should focus on the chase.”

“Finley—”

“I need to use the bathroom.”

He stares at me for a long moment before he exhales. “Alright, I’ll let it go. But Fin-Fin, no matter what ends up happening between you and Ryker, remember that you’re here because you deserve it. I don’t need to be in your master’s classes to know that—you’ve always been a natural at this stuff. Plus, you’re smart, you know weather, and you survived a fucking tornado last night.”

“I did,” I affirm. I know everything he’s saying is right, even if part of me still questions it.

“You did. Also, Ryker wouldn’t have given you a spot on this chase if you didn’t deserve to be here, so don’t question yourself.” We hold our gaze for a long moment before he leans down and kisses me on the cheek. “I’ll see you back out there.”

Once Joey’s gone, I close and lock the door, gripping the porcelain sink while staring at myself in the water-stained mirror. I consider pulling out my cell and calling Jake for a peptalk, but then I’d have to explain to him why I needed one. Instead, I let Joey’s words tumble in my sleep-deprived and overused brain. He’s right—I do deserve to be here, regardless of my relationship with Ryker. Whatever that relationship is.

Knock! Knock!

The sharp rapping on the door jolts me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

I use the bathroom and wash my hands, giving my appearance a once-over again in the mirror. I look tired, but beyond that, I look exactly like I did yesterday. Not that I should look differently—it’s not as if I have a tattoo on my forehead that says, “I slept with my professor.” I snort at myself.

Knock! Knock!

I groan in annoyance and yank open the bathroom door, expecting to see an angry stranger on the other side.

Instead, I see a grumpy-looking Ryker.

Chapter fifteen

Ryker

Finley stares at me from inside the bathroom, and for a moment, I forget why I marched over here to begin with. Her eyes reflect how tired she is, and even I can see she looks a little sad—which I’ll assume is my doing—but I can’t stop myself from barking out, “Can we talk?”

Her shoulders straighten. “About what?”

I want to say, About Joey coming out of the bathroom moments ago—the bathroom you were also in, but I manage to pull in my green-eyed monster. “I—” I look around to make sure there’s nobody near us. Thankfully, there isn’t. “About us.”

Finley blinks then steps out of the bathroom with her arms crossed over her chest. “There is no us. You made that clear.”

I try not to flinch at her words, even though they’re true. “Please, Finley. Let me at least apologize.”

Her eyes narrow. “NoMs. Buckleythis time, Professor West?”

My stomach feels as if there’s a lead ball in it. I know I deserve every bit of her snark and that I don’t deserve to feel hurt by anything she says or does, but I can’t help it. “I’ll call you anything you want me to call you. Please, let me apologize.”

“If it’s an apology for sleeping with me, I don’t want to hear it.”

My eyes widen at her brazen words, and I shake my head. “No, that’s not what—” My sentence is cut off by sounds of laughter that I’d know anywhere: Ezra. My nostrils flare, and a wave of anxiety sets in at the idea of being seen. I glance over my shoulder at the way I came then turn back to Finley as the sound of Ezra’s laughter moves closer now, invading our space.

She sighs in exasperation, and before I can think of what to do next, she grabs me by the front of my T-shirt and pulls me into the bathroom. She turns me and presses my back against the now-closed door, her body so close to mine I can smell her shampoo. I swallow, every nerve in my body sparking as I try to keep my natural reaction to her tamped down. The last thing I need right now is to get a hard-on. Especially if she and Joey—

No, I don’t want to think about that.

“Ms. Buckley.” The formal address is way too breathy to be anything but inappropriate. Her hard gaze softens a bit as she stares at my lips then up into my

eyes. It takes her a split second to remember herself and her anger, and when she does, she steps back and pokes me in the chest.

“Say what you want to say. You have thirty seconds.”

“Fin—”

“Time’s ticking, Professor West.”

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My chest aches at her anger, but I know I deserve it. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve been acting since last night. You don’t deserve it, and neither does Joey.”

Finley blinks at me, her shoulders easing but her lips still curled in her anger. “You’re right, we don’t.”

I keep gentle eye contact with her as I continue. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable. I don’t know how to act around you after...well, everything.”

She drops her arms at her sides and sighs. “So your solution was to be a jerk and act all weird?”

I rub my jaw. “I know, it was wrong of me. I’m sorry.”

Finley’s gaze darts to my lips before connecting with my eyes again. “You’re drawing attention to us, Ryker. The exact opposite of what you wanted.”

My stomach sours. “Has someone made you uncomfortable?” My automatic thought went to Joey, wondering if that’s why they were in this bathroom moments ago. Maybe he was asking her about us instead of coming on to—fuck, I need to stop thinking shit like that before I explode.

“Besides you?” Finley snaps.

I pause and press my lips together. “I deserve that.”

“Yes, you do. Just because we slept together doesn’t mean you get to act like an

asshole. You can regret it all you want, but I've earned my place on this chase, and I don't like the way you've been toward me. It makes me think you chose me to get in my pants, and now that you have—"

Bile rises from my stomach. "Is that really what you think?"

"I don't know what I'm supposed to think. We were fine before yesterday, but now you're different with me. Acting like I'm some fragile doll, asking me if I'm okay in front of Joey. Do I seem traumatized to you?"

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. Like Joey said, you were acting off, and I was concerned. I didn't mean to upset you."

The bathroom goes silent, and I fall still under Finley's analyzing gaze. Her eyes are wide, and her breaths come out short as she takes me in, likely trying to determine if I'm telling the truth or not.

"Why did you pick me for this chase, Ryker?"

My name on her lips settles in my bones, easing me for a moment before I realize what she's asking. My eyes narrow, and anger spikes in my gut. "You're the most qualified—my best student if not one of the best our department has ever seen. Have I made you think otherwise?"

Her chest heaves as her breaths get shorter. "After yesterday, I've been questioning if maybe your choice has been colored by"—she waves between the two of us—"whatever this is between us. It doesn't help that you bought me a brand-new camera. I shouldn't have accepted it. Maybe I shouldn't even be here."

My chest cracks in two, and anger flares hot, making me lash out. "Stop that right now." The command comes out in a bark, one that has her jumping at the tone of it. "I

may be an asshole sometimes, but don't ever think that I would do that to you. You should know me better than that, know yourself better than that. Don't ever question why you're here or if you should be here. You earned this spot, and that's that."

"Ryker..." She trails off, her tone still defeated.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I step into her space, backing her toward the far wall of the small bathroom. "Do you really think I would bring you here this weekend if you didn't deserve it?"

"I don't know."

I chuff. "What do you think I do? Fudge your grades? Give you an advantage?" My voice gets harsher now. "You take all of your tests online except for finals, which are still checked by a scanner. Your lab grades are not something I would ever fudge nor would I want to. You know the work we do is too important to me. You've earned every A and opportunity you've been given. Do I make myself clear?"

"I—"

Our chests brush together, and the warmth of her body seeps into mine as I stare down at her. "Do I make myself clear, Ms. Buckley?"

Finley licks her lips, a long pause passing between us before she says, "I hear you." But her voice is quiet and too meek. I don't like it—I don't like it at all.

I stare deeper into the brown depths of her eyes, our bodies even closer now. We're close enough that I swear I can feel her heart pounding in her chest, beating in time with mine. "I mean it. Tell me you don't think so little of yourself."

"Ryker, I..." She trails off again.

“Tell. Me.” I punctuate the words. “I want to hear you say it.”

“I don’t think so little of myself,” she breathes out, the warmth of her breath puffing against my cheek.

“Say it again, louder.”

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Finley tilts her chin up, our eyes locked. For a second, I don't think she's going to do it, but then her lips part. "I don't think so little of myself."

Her words soothe some of the dull ache in my chest, but I know I have a lot more to make up for, a lot more than this moment I need to atone for. How did I fuck up so much in such a short amount of time?

When I take a breath, our chests bump together as my lungs fill with air. We're standing too close, but I can't find it in myself to move away. I want another moment to revel in her nearness, in the heat of her pliant body and the softness of her gaze. It's a softness I've missed since the moment I told her I regretted laying my hands on her, especially because that was a lie.

"Ryker," she whispers, my gaze drawn to her pink lips. Lips that look untouched and wholly kissable, a fact that alleviates a bit of the stupid jealousy that's been clawing at me. I could easily lean down and press my lips to hers, but I know I can't, not after the conversation we just had. Finley deserves to be on this team and feel like a fundamental part of this chase, and I need to get my shit together.

It takes everything in me to finally lean away from the sunshine of her skin and clear my throat. "You've been an asset to this team, both yesterday and today. Keep doing what you're doing, and I'll do better. I promise."

"And you'll be nicer to Joey?"

I nod. "Yes, but maybe you can convince him not to wear that T-shirt?"

Finley chokes out a sharp laugh. “Not a chance.”

I groan, though my lips are turned up at the corners. “I suppose I deserve that as well.” We’re quiet for another moment, the smell of the musty old bathroom tickling my nose. “We should get back out there before the others come looking for us.”

She tips her chin, and I turn to leave. As my hand touches the door, she stops me. “I’m sorry I was snappy this morning and didn’t let you talk.”

“It’s okay—”

“No, I should have been more mature. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

She sighs and holds out her hand. “Friends?”

I want to balk at the word, because there would never be a world in which Finley and I could only be friends. I think she knows that, too. But what other choice do we have? This weekend needs to remain platonic, not only for both of us mentally but for the safety of ourselves and our crew as well, not to mention the integrity of our research.

I turn back to her fully and place my palm in her soft hand, giving it a firm shake. “Friends, Ms. Buckley.”

She smiles softly. “Call me Finley.”

I echo her smile on my own lips, her hand still in mine. “Then be sure to call me Ryker, no more Professor stuff. Not in front of the team.”

She nods. “What about Tornado Daddy?”

My dick twitches in my pants at the way “daddy” sounded coming from her. Fucking Joseph and his goddamn nicknames. I need to come up with a good one for him, though he’d probably like anything I came up with and delight in it.

“Let’s stick with Ryker.” My mouth opens to say more when our phones both go off at the same time with an emergency alert.

Finley removes her hand from mine to take out her phone as I do the same. Once we’ve both looked at the severe storm warning, our eyes meet, and the smiles on our faces are matching wide grins.

“Ready to try to make history again?”

She nods. “Lead the way.”

Chapter sixteen

Finley

It’s evening, and the heavy late spring air is damp against my skin as the group of us stand around our parked vehicles outside a motel in southern Oklahoma.

Ezra and Ryker are looking at something on the computer perched on the red truck’s hood, and Hawk is inside grabbing us some rooms for the night while Joey and I type out texts on our phones. We’ve finished up our last chase and are all ready to rest, especially after another failed rocket launch attempt and a missed tornado that was too far from us to reach in time.

I pull up Jake’s contact and shoot him a text while we wait.

ME

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First day was good, all safe.

I expect him to take time to answer since he's probably at work, but his text back is immediate.

JAKE

Thank the twister gods. I didn't think I'd hear from you, but I'm glad you're safe. Where are you?

ME

Somewhere in Oklahoma. Getting a room for the night.

JAKE

Hopefully not with Ryker?

I roll my eyes and send him a gif of a cute cartoon bunny giving him a middle finger.

JAKE

Does that mean you are?!?!?

ME

I'm not answering you.

JAKE

side-eye emoji I'm making a mental note to ask you about that response later. I gotta get back to work. Lots of parties here tonight looking to ride Tornado. Love you.

I smile at the name of Jake's mechanical bull. When he told me he got a new one for his bar and named it after me, I told him Finley was a dumb name for a bull. But when he corrected me and said its name was Tornado, I knew it was perfect. I like it even more now that the darn thing makes the bar a ton of money.

ME

Love you, too.

I slip myphone back in my jeans pocket as Joey does the same. "You good, Finney?" he asks.

"Yep. Could use a shower and a crispy Diet Coke, maybe a massage and a shot of whiskey, too. Otherwise, I'm good."

"Hmm, a shower is probably wise—you stink."

I pull away from him and scoff. "I do not."

He holds up his fingers until the pads are an inch apart. "Maybe a little."

I smack his arm, and he chuckles. "Okay, you don't stink, but if you're serious about the crispy Diet Coke and whiskey, I know a place that'll take care of that. As far as the massage, I've been told I have magic hands."

He wiggles his fingers at me, and I laugh. “I may take you up on that.”

The sound of a throat clearing has me looking at Ryker. He’s pretending to pay attention to whatever Ezra is showing him on the computer, but I can see his bearded jaw is clenched so tight he may break some teeth—which means he heard what Joey said as well as my response. If he was looking at me, I’d give him the stink eye, but he’s not.

After our talk in the bathroom, he’s been at least nicer to Joey and everyone on the team, but he could still work on his reactions to Joey’s natural flirtatiousness. He’s like this with everyone. And I still can’t believe Ryker doesn’t notice the way Hawk and Joey look at each other, or if he does, he doesn’t realize what it means. That’s the only explanation for why he’s still being weird every time Joey touches me or says something remotely playful. To add to that, Ryker doesn’t have any claim over me—we’ve made that clear.

Joey leans down so his mouth is near my ear and only I can hear his next words. “Looks like the professor is a little jealous of my mad massage skills.”

I turn my gaze to Joey, who looks like the devil in a cowboy hat that he is with a smirk on his lips and a toothpick he got from somewhere stuck between his lips. “Don’t start.”

He chews on the little stick of wood. “He wants you so bad, Fin-Fin.”

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I shove at him playfully, and he cackles.

“What’s so funny over there?” Ezra asks as he shuts his computer. He and Ryker both turn toward us.

“Nothing, little inside joke,” Joey answers, pulling away from me and rubbing his hands. “But Finley made a good suggestion. She wants a drink, and I could use one, too. There’s a fine establishment within walking distance from here, according to Google Maps. Could be fun to let off some steam after that last chase.”

“I’ve got some social media stuff I want to get done,” Ezra says, “but y’all should go. Ryker needs a drink.”

We all look at Ryker, who has his hands shoved in his pockets and very much looks like he could use a drink. I know he’s disappointed the launches haven’t gone as planned, and even though he acted more like the man I know after we talked at the diner, joking and laughing more easily with everyone the last few hours, he’s still acting uptight—especially if I compare him to the playful and unserious extreme storm chaser I’ve seen on TT’s videos.

“I should probably stay sober,” he says.

“Come on, old man. We’re done chasing for the night. One drink won’t kill you. Maybe you’ll even pick up a girl.” Ezra checks his shoulder. “Maybe a horizontal dance will make you feel better.”

Joey stifles a laugh, and I try to keep my face unreadable, even if the comment makes

me nauseous. The last thing I want to think about is Ryker sleeping with a woman from a bar. Of course, that would be his choice, and like him with me, I don't have any claim on him. That still doesn't make the image easier to stomach.

"Sorry, Finley," Ezra says, "that was crass."

I blink up into his eyes before I realize I failed at keeping my emotion off my face. It's scrunched up in a sour expression, and apparently, he thought I was grossed out by what he said. I was, but not for the reason he assumed.

"You can say whatever you want in front of me. I'm used to hanging around men." Which is very true. I have girlfriends, and I enjoy spending time with all genders, but somehow, my life has been me and dudes. If I'm not around my dad, then there's Jake and my uncle, and most of the people I spend time with at school are men. Not by choice, but because the meteorology program is mostly male. It's how the cookie crumbled.

"Well, you can hang around more of them tonight!" Joey waggles his eyebrows. "I remember you being a great dancer, too. I call dibs on the first one!"

"Joey." I laugh, ignoring Ryker's glare that I feel burning into the side of my head. "Maybe we should call it a night instead."

He shakes his head. "You wanted a crispy Diet Coke and a shot of whiskey, I can provide that. Then when we get back, I'll rub your feet."

Ezra laughs. "You can come to my room and rub my feet if you want."

"Don't tempt me with a good time," Joey volleys back, making Ezra laugh harder.

"Alright, I have bad news." The four of us turn to Hawk, who's walking up with an

envelope in his hand. “They only have two rooms left. Ryker, myself, and Ezra can share—they have a cot they can roll in for one of us—but...”

“Fin and I can definitely be roomies,” Joey says way too happily. “It will be easier to rub her feet that way. Right, Finney?”

Hawk looks at Joey like he’s a crazed lunatic, and I bite my lip to keep from giggling.

“Rub her feet?” he asks.

“It’s fine, I’ll room with Joey,” I say, cutting in so Joey doesn’t launch into an explanation.

“Are you sure?” Hawk asks. “If not, we can get back on the road.”

“It’s really fine. I’ll make him sleep on the floor.”

“Hey!” he retorts. “We can put up a wall of pillows.”

“We can get back on the road,” Ryker interrupts.

Joey grins like a fool at Ryker’s response, and Ezra looks confused while Hawk looks...frustrated?

“I can handle Joey for a night,” I say so things don’t have a chance to get weird—or more weird. “I trust him to be a gentleman.”

Everyone except Ryker chuffs a laugh at that notion, but I know it’s all in good fun. I do trust Joey, and it’s not like there’s another option unless I share with Ezra or Hawk or Ryker—which definitely would not be good or appropriate. Joey is the safest choice.

“I’ll be a good boy, I promise. No touchie...unless you want it.” He sing-songs the last part.

“Joey!” Hawk scolds, but I shake my head and push Joey with my shoulder. Though I’ll admit, Hawk gets bonus points for showing no jealousy. I don’t know exactly how their relationship works, but he seems to get Joey and how he operates. Which I appreciate.

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“Let’s get to our rooms, and then get that drink,” Joey says.

“Drink?” Hawk asks, a smile on his lips. “I could use a drink.”

“It’s settled, then. We’re going out!” Joey cheers. “But first, we shower.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me again, and I shove him harder, ignoring Ryker’s still-burning stare as I head to the back of the truck to grab my things. This is going to be an interesting night.

Chapter seventeen

Ryker

I can’t take my eyes off her. Her body moves like it was made to dance, and I find myself wondering what else I don’t know about Finley Buckley.

From the moment we walked into this western bar, appropriately named OK Saloon, Joey’s had her wrapped in his arms, twirling her around the dance floor to various country western songs. Hawk has even danced a couple with her while Joey took a break to chat with me or dance with another woman. He’s very popular, which doesn’t surprise me.

I, too, have been asked multiple times by various women if I wanted to dance or “Get outta here,” but I’m happily unhappy where I am: Watching the woman I want dance with men who aren’t me and nursing a watered-down whiskey.

Could I be out there dancing? Yes. But would Finley even want to dance with me? Doubtful. Besides, with everything that's gone down—and now that we're "just friends"—it'd feel weird.

"You look like someone kicked your puppy," Joey says as he comes back from the floor, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Thanks," I snipe back, looking over his shoulder to see Finley safely in the arms of Hawk. My shoulders relax a bit at the sight, even though I stupidly find myself jealous of my best friend, who's not even interested in her.

"Can I have that?" Joey points to my drink, but before I can say anything, he takes it from my hand and downs it.

"I was going to say no."

He smacks his lips and grins, putting the empty glass on the bar top. "You were taking too long to drink it, anyway. I did you a favor."

I swallow down my jerk reaction to bicker with him and look back out at the floor. Hawk dips Finley, making her giggle. Okay, maybe I am very jealous of my best friend. That should be me out there...

Joey nudges my shoulder. "Go ask her to dance."

I shake my head and remove my gaze from the two of them. "I don't dance."

"That's a bunch of bull crap if I ever heard it. I saw you dance and woo women the night after our last Channel 5 chase, remember? You've got pretty good rhythm for an old white guy, T-Daddy."

I cast Joey a hard stare. “Are you trying to annoy me, Joseph?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs cheekily. “If I was really trying, though, I would’ve worn another one of my T-shirts instead of this plain ol’ boring one.” I growl at him, and he cackles. “You’re way too easy to rile up this trip, Ry-Ry.”

“Ry-Ry?”

Joey shrugs, waving down the bartender for a beer. “Wanted to try it out, see how it feels on the tongue. But you know what?” He leans down so his lips are at my ear. “I like Daddy better.”

“Joseph—”

“Oh, lighten up, for fuck’s sake.” He hands me a beer I didn’t ask for before taking one for himself. “You’re at a honky-tonk in Oklahoma drinking a beer after a day of doing what you love, and the woman you like is here. Doesn’t get much better than that.”

My heart rate speeds up. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Joey sips his beer then grins at me like a fool. “Puh-leaseeee, I’m not an idiot. I bet Hawk that, by the end of tonight, you and Finley would kiss.”

My jaw clenches, and the hand I have holding my beer becomes stiff. Everything in me begins to scream, Divert! Divert!

“You’ll lose money, then. Should’ve bet on yourself.”

Joey lets a loud laugh rip out of his chest, and he smacks his knee. “Me and Fin? Yeah, right. She shut me down back in college, and we’ve been flirty friends ever

since. She's hot but in a no-chase zone."

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Relief zips through me, but I'm still confused. "You were in the bathroom with her earlier."

He rolls his eyes. "She may be upset at me for saying this, but I'm going to take the chance she'll forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

He taps a fingernail on the side of his beer bottle. "We weren't canoodling in the bathroom. I was talking to her about her little man problem—or should I say, a big man problem." Joey lifts his eyebrows and sips his beer, waiting for me to respond.

I think my mouth opens to say something, but I'm speechless—not only from the clear innuendo but because I didn't think Finley would tell him about us, either.

"Oh, stop looking so shocked, Professor. I smelled you on her a mile away. Finley didn't have to tell me shit."

My forehead pinches in confusion. "Smelled me?"

Joey chuckles. "You've been acting like a jealous boyfriend all day. Hawk saw it, I saw it, I don't know if Ezra did but probably. He's too involved in his work to care, I think. Not that any of us care what you do with your dick, but you've been a dick because of said dick so...here we are."

"I—" I attempt words but I'm still speechless. "I'm sorry."

He waves me off. “You can apologize to me later. Let’s talk about you being a dick to Finley instead.”

I pause, unsure of what to say next. Finally, I get my vocal cords to work. “You’re really not pursuing her?”

“That’s what you want to say?”

“I thought—”

He tips the brim of his cowboy hat, his voice lower as he asks, “You know I’m bi, right?”

I blink at him. “No, why would I?”

“Wow, you are so blind. Blinder than I thought. I thought you would’ve realized or someone would’ve told you by now. I also tend to prefer men.” The corner of his mouth turns up. “Men of the tall, dark, and smart variety.”

My eyes widen, and Joey cackles like a loon. “Not you, T-Daddy!”

Heads swivel toward us at Joey’s nickname, which he said very loudly. We’re in a small town practically in the middle of nowhere, where men usually don’t go around calling other men “daddy” like it’s their actual name—at least, not in public. Nor do they talk about their sexuality.

“Joey,” I warn, but he waves me off, clearly not caring. He does lower his voice again, though.

“Who or what I like doesn’t matter right now, but what does matter is that you like Finley, and you’re fucking it up.”

“There’s nothing to fuck up.” And that’s the truth. Finley and I agreed to befriends.

“You know, you wouldn’t be the first person to have a relationship with someone they quote-unquote ‘shouldn’t,’” he says near my ear. “I know what it’s like to feel like you have to hide, and that’s a shitty feeling. The good news is that you and Finley don’t have to. She’s an adult, and so are you. The professor stuff is bullshit. You can go to HR, quit your job, or take a year off. And I’m sure there are even more options that I’m not thinking of right now.” He pulls back from my ear and grins at me.

I grit my teeth. “You know everything that happened, then?”

“Like I said, I figured out most of it on my own since you practically pissed on her—”

“I did not—”

“You did, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is what you’re going to do now to fix things with Finley.”

I run my hand over my beard. Maybe I should feel awkward that both Hawk and Joey—and maybe even Ezra—know about Finley and I, but I have to admit it feels as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders now that the secret has been spoken.

“What are you going to do?” Joey pushes.

“I don’t think it’s as simple as you say. I don’t want shit to go south for her at school and around town when people start gossiping.”

Joey takes another sip of his beer. “So don’t let it,” he says, as if that’s the easiest thing in the world to do—and fuck, maybe it is.

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“You’re very optimistic.”

“It’s one of my many amazing traits,” he gloats. “But look, I may not know everything that’s gone down between you and our girl, but it must be something good if you risked anything in the first place. That’s my two cents.”

He puts his beer down on the counter and smacks me on the shoulder hard enough that I shift on my stool. “I’m going to hit the head. But I suggest you look out on that dance floor and then ask yourself, ‘Tornado Daddy, do you like watching the woman you’re head over heels for being touched by another man?’ then start making your decisions.”

He smacks me again then walks off toward the bathroom, leaving me to look out at the floor. The words he said finally register when my eyes land on Finley. She’s no longer dancing with Hawk; he’s nowhere in sight. In his place is a dark-haired man in a cowboy hat and jeans. She’s smiling politely at him, and my body lights up with a jealous rage that feels like antifreeze rushing through my veins.

I’m off my chair and making my way to the dance floor before I can take my next breath, and soon, my hand is grabbing the back of the man’s T-shirt and pulling him from Finley.

“Hey! We were dancin’,” he grouses.

“I’m cutting in.”

“I was—”

I turn to the green-eyed man and narrow my eyes at him. “Your dance is finished.” He grumbles something that I don’t care to hear, then I turn to face a very confused and not-at-all-amused Finley.

“Really?” she questions, a hand planted on one of her rounded hips.

“Finley, I—”

She turns and starts to walk off the floor, but I gently grab her hand, tugging her into me. Our chests bump, the position reminding me of the one we stood in hours before in the diner bathroom.

“What are you doing, Ryker?”

My hand grips hers, and I look into her eyes, eyes that are simmering with annoyance and confusion, hard emotions that I put there again because apparently, around her, I become a possessive asshole who says and does dick-ish things.

“Dance with me?” The fast-paced song that was playing changes to a slow one as the question slips from my lips.

Finley looks at all the people moving around us then back at me. “Why?”

My chest tightens, and blood whooshes in my ears. I could attempt a lie and say I simply wanted to dance, but that’s not the truth. Joey’s words ring in my ears alongside Hawk’s. I have been a complete and utter dick, and honestly, is a relationship with Finley really that complicated? In a lot of ways, it is, but in some ways, maybe more important ways, it’s not at all.

“Because I want to dance with you,” I finally say. “I’ve been wanting to dance with you all night.”

“And you waited until a stranger asked me to dance to cut in?”

“Finley, I...fuck, I’m sorry. I don’t know how to do this.”

“What? Be nice?”

Okay, I deserved that, too. I squeeze her hand gently, and she stares at it for a moment before looking at me again. I soften my gaze, using my eyes to convey my apology then backing it up with words.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I keep fucking things up, and I know you don’t owe me anything. But please, one dance.”

A couple two-stepping across the floor bumps into us and mumbles something like “dance or get off the floor.”

Finley flushes with embarrassment and whispers an apology before placing her hand on my shoulder, her other hand still in mine as our bodies press closer together. My entire being lights up at her touch, and every negative thought I’ve had expels from my mind.

“Is that a yes?” I ask, unable to suppress my hope.

“One dance,” she says. “Only one.”

Chapter eighteen

Finley

Ryker tucks me into his muscular body, the sandalwood and citrus smell of him along with beer and whiskey hitting my nose. The song that plays as we sway is irrelevant,

because my heart is pounding so loudly in my ears, it's all I can hear. I shouldn't have agreed to dance with him, but when he's close to me, touching me, it's hard to think straight—even when I'm annoyed with him.

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“Joey is right; you’re a good dancer.” His husky voice wraps around me, and I swallow the lump that’s built in my throat.

“Thanks,” I say, avoiding his eyes. Ryker’s been leading me around the dance floor for the last couple of minutes with ease. He’s not a bad dancer himself, though I guess I should have known that would be the case. Ryker is good at everything he does except communicating with me in the last twenty-four hours.

“Do you go out dancing a lot?” he asks right before he spins me out.

The action takes me by surprise, but I’m quick to regain my bearings. When I come back into his chest, he’s smiling softly, and the hand that’s back on my waist is heavier than before. I should push it off or leave the dance floor, but I can’t bring myself to. It feels too good to be held by him.

I shake my head. “Not much anymore. I did a lot when I was younger since I spent my summers with my cousin, Jake, and his Pops at their bar in Texas. They’re big into line dancing and two-stepping there.”

He hums and continues to move us across the floor, leading me as if we’ve danced together a hundred times before. My body starts to relax naturally in his hold, feeling safe in his arms. When I meet his eyes, the intensity and longing in them makes my heart ache and my body stiffen again. I told him one dance, I can’t let myself get this comfortable again when I know it will lead nowhere.

Crap. I really should have said no. He’s lucky I’m even allowing him this dance, especially after the way he ripped that guy off me. Even if I’m secretly glad he did.

Not that there was anything wrong with the man, but I could tell he wanted more from me than just a dance, something I wasn't going to give. Ryker saved me from having to awkwardly slink away after the song finished.

Ryker leads me into another spin, and when he pulls me back in, our bodies collide. A small breath puffs from my lips, and before I can move away, Ryker presses his hand on my low back to keep us together. The heat of him seeps through my clothes, adding warmth to my already flushed skin.

"Ryker," I say softly enough that only he can hear.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he lets go of my hand, our dancing now more of a slow sway, and lifts his fingers to brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear. The touch sends a shiver down my spine.

"Are you alright?" He pulls me tighter to him as if he thinks I shivered from the cold. My mouth goes dry, but I manage a nod, his pale green eyes sucking me into his vortex. Our dancing slows further, my breath ceasing in my lungs as he brushes the rough pad of his pointer finger along the shell of my ear then down my cheekbone. I should stop him or push him away, tell him this isn't what we agreed upon and that Hawk or Joey will see. Not to mention, we said we'd be friends.

Friends.

I want to laugh. Who am I kidding? Ryker and I can't be friends. It's why I've already started to think of ways I can complete my last year of school from home, or if nothing else, spend lectures in his class then avoid him as much as possible otherwise, even if the idea makes my stomach hurt. Because despite everything that's happened, I don't want to avoid him.

"Finley." His pained voice breaks through my spiral. "You're so beautiful."

My heart hits the pause button, and I briefly wonder if this place has a defibrillator in case I collapse.

I stare wide-eyed at Ryker. My skin is prickling from where his hands are touching me, and my vision starts spotting as I stare at his pink lips, lips that twenty-four hours ago were touching and teasing mine.

Another dancer bumps into me, and my body pushes further into his. His hard chest is now pressing against my breasts, making my nipples pebble beneath my shirt. The sensation does the opposite of what I'd think it would, though, bringing my brain back online to reality instead of sending me further into his thrall.

Ryker's finger traces my cheekbone again, and the sounds of the bar filter back into my awareness. It's only then I notice the song has shifted from a slow one to something upbeat. We're not moving anymore, both of us caught in the other's gaze.

"Ryker, what are we doing?" My voice sounds foreign and far away as his thumb brushes against the lower pad of my lip.

"I think I've been an idiot, Finley."

A part of me wants to reply with a smart-mouthed answer, but I don't need to reiterate how true his statement is. I want to ask him why he thinks that, though, have him confess whatever is on his mind. His thumb traces my lip again, and I open my mouth to ask him, but then I'm bumped into once more.

"If you're going to stare at each other, do it somewhere else," the woman who ran into me says as she and her dance partner move past us.

Her words feel like freezing water has been dumped on my head, and if Ryker was the type of man to blush, I think he'd be doing so right now. I pull away from his

warmth, but his hand tugs on mine.

“I said one dance,” I remind him.

Ryker runs his free hand through his feathered dark hair, hair that’s wavy and free instead of under his usual hat. He looks more like the man I see on a daily basis, dressed casually in jeans and a black T-shirt instead of slacks and a button-up.

“Can we talk somewhere private?” he asks.

“We’ve already talked, remember?”

“Please, Finley? I—”

“Move already.” The same grumpy woman from before snaps as she makes another round past us. I glare at her, but all she does is glare back. Maybe she’s a sign that I should talk to Ryker.

I stare up into his hopeful eyes and nod. “Alright. We can talk.”

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A faint smile tugs at Ryker's lips, and he leads me away from the floor. I don't know where he's taking us. A small part of me screams at the rest of me not to follow him, that being alone with him when we clearly can't stop staring and touching each other like horny, angsty people is a bad idea. But his voice sounded so—pained.

His hand grips mine tighter as we weave through more people, some drunk, some laughing. I quickly scan the bar area for Joey, and when I find him, I can't help but smile. He's there with Hawk, their bodies close together as Hawk laughs at something he says.

As if Joey knows I'm looking, he glances up and sees Ryker pulling me away. He waggles his eyebrows like he loves to do, and I imagine if I was next to him, he'd say something like "don't forget to use protection."

He'd been bothering me all night while we were dancing, telling me that Ryker couldn't stop looking at my ass and that there's no way the man only wanted to be friends. It's probably why I'd been inclined to let Ryker dance with me and now talk with me. Joey softened me up, the menace.

The sounds of people and music fade as we enter a back hallway that leads to the bathrooms. At first, I think he's going to take me into one, but then he keeps tugging me further down the dark corridor. Eventually, he comes to an emergency exit, but that doesn't stop him. He pushes open the door as I'm about to protest, but thankfully, no alarm sounds.

The warm evening air hits with the sound of crickets chirping in the field behind the building. I suck in a long breath, and Ryker turns to me as the door closes behind us.

We stand there for a moment, the dim lights from the side of the building illuminating his masculine features and serious face. We're alone out here, and I can hardly hear the music or the patrons inside from where we are. Ryker lifts one of his hands like he wants to touch me again, but then he sticks them both in his pockets.

"I've really fucked up with you, Finley."

I sigh. "We already had a conversation about us."

"No, I—" He looks up at the dark sky and releases a breath before returning his gaze to mine. "I shouldn't have told you I regret what happened."

Okay, maybe now my heart has stopped in my chest. Is this what he meant when he said he was an idiot?

"What?" I ask. "What do you mean?"

He takes a small step forward, and when I don't recede, he takes another one so we're sharing the same air.

"I don't regret what happened between us. At least, not in the way I made you believe."

Maybe I need a defibrillator. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because when I saw you in there, saw another man touching you, I—"

"No," I snap. "You don't get to do that."

"Finley, I—"

“You told me you regretted me. That you regretted us. You don’t get to take it back now because you’re jealous.”

“Please, let me finish.”

“I don’t know if you deserve that.”

“I don’t!” he shouts before lowering his voice. “I don’t. But I’m begging you, please. I made a mistake.”

“A mistake? Or are you just being selfish now?”

He inhales a sharp breath, and it’s then I realize that we’re not only sharing the same air, the same space, but his body is touching mine again. How do we keep gravitating toward each other like this? And did he move or did I? Did we both?

“I am being selfish, I know that,” he says. “And I won’t deny that watching Joey flirt with you all day and seeing the way all those men looked at you in there makes me want to pull you close and never let go. But the moment I lied, I knew it was a mistake. I don’t regret us, Finley. I can’t regret you.”

I let his words sink in for a moment. My heart beats slowly in my chest now. “Then why did you say it?”

“Because I was a coward. I was worried about my job. More importantly, I was worried about what the implications of a relationship with you would mean for you. I know that part of me was right to think that, because you thought I picked you for this chase because I like you, not because you’re the most qualified.”

“I really only felt that way afterward. I didn’t question it until yesterday.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’ve been an idiot, I admit that. Please, Finley, I’m so sorry. Tell me what to do so you’ll forgive me.”

“Is that all you want? My forgiveness so you can clear your conscience or something?”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s not—I want you. I was an idiot to try to convince myself otherwise, because I do want you. I want you more than I’ve wanted anything in a long time—and I have since the moment you walked into my classroom.”

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His words wrap around my heart and squeeze like the tightening eye of a storm. But after what he said last night and the way he's been acting today, my brain doesn't want to absorb the words.

"I don't believe you," I say quietly.

Ryker steps forward, and my body moves with his. I'm about to ask him what he's doing, but then my back hits the brick wall of the building. His strong body molds to mine, and his thumb strokes my cheek like it did minutes ago. The heat of it burns my skin.

"Let me make you believe."

My mouth parts as Ryker cups my cheek, his head leaning down until I feel his warm breath on my lips.

"Can I kiss you, Finley?"

Reality fades around me, and all I can see is Ryker. My Ryker. The man who looked at me when I walked into his first lecture and smiled so wide, I felt his joy through it. The man who's been nothing but kind and encouraging to me and my dreams since the moment I met him. The man who I've crushed on for far too long and has become a friend even when he shouldn't have been. Even when I knew it was a bad idea to let myself fall for him harder than I ever thought possible.

"If you kiss me, you can't take it back."

He strokes my cheek and rests his forehead on mine. “I won’t. I won’t take it back.”

“If you do—”

“Baby,” he hushes. “I’m not going to take it back.”

His endearment does me in. As if my lips have a mind of their own, I press my mouth to his. For a moment, he’s still, his brain working to catch up to my action, but once it does, he unleashes.

Lips, teeth, and tongue are all I know for the next few moments as I try to catch up to the hurried strokes of Ryker’s tongue. My hands fly to his waist, gripping the bunching muscles between my fingers as I moan into his mouth.

“You’re so goddamn addictive,” he groans between kisses.

I lean my head to the side, and his mouth moves down the column of my throat. He sucks on my fluttering pulse, and I press my head back into the wall, gripping his toned ass with one of my hands and thrusting my chest into his so my nipples rub against the fabric of my bra.

“Ryker,” I moan as his swollen lips find mine again. His alcohol-flavored tongue massages mine, fingers gripping my head so he can dominate the kiss.

“Tell me this is okay,” he mutters against my lips, sucking the bottom one into his mouth. “Tell me you want me to keep kissing you.”

I pull his hips into me, feeling his erection heavy against my center. “I want more than that.” He curses under his breath and tugs me closer so our bodies practically become one.

I know I should slow things down, that we should use our words instead of our bodies to work things out between us. We haven't discussed what this means for us and our future. We haven't even been on a date—unless you count our chase gone wrong yesterday. This is all moving so fast, a vortex of lust and emotions colliding in a perfect storm. And even though I should care about what this means or doesn't, I don't right now. I only want to feel him everywhere.

“The motel,” he murmurs between hurried kisses.

“Joey—”

“We'll put a sock on the door handle.”

I can't help it; I laugh. Not only because Joey would one-hundred-percent know that sign to keep out and love it when he saw it but also that Ryker said something funny, reminding me of the man I know and like.

That man lets out a breathy chuckle then kisses up my neck until he's hovering over my lips. “Is that a yes?”

“It's a yes, but I'll send him a text instead.” I study Ryker's face at my words, expecting him to balk or pull away at my suggestion, because if I do that, Joey will know who's in the motel room with me. But instead of disagreeing or trying to stop me, Ryker puts his hand in my back pocket and pulls out my phone, handing it to me.

“Tell him the room will be occupied for a while. I have some making up to do.”

Chapter nineteen

Ryker

I lock the motelroom door after hanging the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the handle for good measure then turn my gaze to Finley. She’s staring at me through hooded eyes from atop the queen bed, her delicious body wrapped in tight jeans and a light-pink V-neck T-shirt, her feet bare after she kicked off her shoes and socks, discarding them by the door.

My mouth waters as I trail my gaze from her earthy brown eyes down to her heaving chest, across the expanse of her round stomach and plump thighs, all the way to her toes that are painted a light pink that almost matches her shirt.

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She's stunning, and I can't believe she agreed to be here with me after how I've been acting. But I'm done questioning if what I feel for her and what we shared yesterday is right or wrong. I'm over trying to fight my feelings for her. Fuck my job and all the bullshit that comes with it.

Finley is everything I want, the woman I didn't know I'd been searching for. I didn't realize it before, but I've been chasing her for the last year. And Joey is right: I'd been risking my job already. I have been from the moment we started flirting, since the moment she walked into my classroom. It makes me wonder if teaching is even something I care that much about after all. Because if it was, I would have never dared to cross any sort of line with her to begin with.

Yep, I've been an idiot, but that's over now. I want to focus on Finley and how we can move forward together, because I know there's no way I can forget what we've shared and simply be friends. It's impossible. Zero probability.

"Professor West?"

My gaze snaps to Finley's hooded stare, her sultry tone heating my blood and giving my cock its own heartbeat. I clear my throat. "Yes, Ms. Buckley?"

She grins coyly. "Are you going to stare at me all night, or are you going to fuck me?"

Goddamn. I practically pounce on the overly hard bed, her body bouncing from the force and the springs squeaking beneath our collective weight. She giggles, that sweet sound I love that sends more blood rushing south until my dick tents my jeans.

Someday, I'm going to take Finley back to my home and fuck her on my nice bed, a soft bed that doesn't have starched sheets and cardboard pillows. But for now, at least we have a bed instead of a muddy ditch.

I situate myself next to her and rub my thumb over her flushed cheek, tracing one of the scratches she received yesterday. "I'm going to kiss you again," I tell her. "Then you have three choices after that."

She bites her lower lip, but before she can brutalize it, I tug the flesh between my teeth and kiss her hard and fast, tasting her on my tongue again and again until our chests are heaving and I swear the room temperature has gone up by ten degrees.

Her fingers begin to play with the buckle of my belt as she pulls back. "Are you giving me a multiple choice test, Professor?"

I groan, pressing my thumb into her pouting lower lip. "This isn't a test, simply a question. And all the answers are right."

She hums and sucks the tip of my finger between her lips before pulling back. "What's the question?"

"Do you, A, want me to lick your pussy until you're begging for me to fill you with my cock"—a small whimper escapes her lips—"B, want to grip the headboard and ride my face until you suffocate me with your sweet cunt—"

"Ryker," she moans, her hips rubbing against my jean-clad thigh.

"Or, C, want to get on your hands and knees and let me fuck you so hard our wall neighbor, who happens to be Ezra, will call the front desk to give them a noise complaint."

Her hot pussy thrusts against my leg, and I can't resist pressing my two fingers against her wet tongue, enjoying the way her pupils blow from my combined words and teasing.

"Can more than one be correct?" she asks once I remove my fingers.

My lips tip into a lopsided grin. "Anything you want, baby."

"A and C."

"Good answers." I get her to lie flat on her back before I roll over and straddle her, easily discarding my shirt and throwing it somewhere on the floor. Her eyes eat up every muscle and plane of my chest hungrily, and her lips part as she takes me in. I see her smile when her eyes land on the tattoo of a violent storm spanning my right pec.

"It suits you," she says, reaching an arm up so her fingers brush over the bottom of the tornado, causing me to shiver. "Now, take off your pants."

A breathy chuckle loosens from my chest. "Anything for you."

She grins cheekily as I unbuckle my belt, the sound of the metal jingling before I tug down my zipper. The action only excites her more, and her hips gyrate under me. I move off of her briefly so I can remove my jeans, then she adds, "Boxers, too."

"Hmm, I like you bossy."

She shrugs from the bed, her eyes on my crotch. "Not bossy. I know what I want."

The skin at the corners of her eyes crinkle with amusement as I hook my fingers in my waistband, discarding my boxers so I'm completely naked. Her eyes study me

like I'm a storm cell she's set to chase, and I want to preen from the voracious way she's taking in every aspect of my form, particularly my erection that stands ready and leaking precum between my legs.

With her eyes never leaving mine, I resume my position on top of her, prowling over her carefully as my lips find hers again. My cock rubs against her pussy that I know is soaking her clothes, the stiff fabric and the thoughts of tasting her making me groan into her mouth.

Finley attempts to thread her hands in my hair, but I stop her, moving them up and over her head so her wrists are pinned to the creaky bed.

She pulls away from my lips. "I want to touch you."

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“Not yet.” I nip at her lips. “If you touch me, I’m going to make a mess between your thighs, all over your nice jeans. I don’t want to embarrass myself.”

She moans, and I kiss her again, exploring her mouth with my tongue so her taste will linger on my lips until morning. I memorize every sound she makes and all the ways her body sings under my attention.

Then I trail kisses down her cheek to her neck. “Leave your hands where they are,” I command. “Can you do that for me?”

She nods and bites her lip all sexy. “Yes, Professor.”

My dick throbs at her naughty response, and I hum against her sweet and salty skin, moving down her body so I can kiss her collarbone and the tops of her round tits.

I bunch up her shirt as I move further down, kissing the faint pink stretch marks on her soft stomach before dipping my tongue into her belly button. She moans, and I see her hands twitch as if she’s going to reach for me.

I gently bite her stomach, and she gasps. “Don’t forget. Keep your hands where they are, baby.”

She nods and watches me with lust-filled eyes, her skin flushed and lips plump from my kisses. I lick up her stomach again then use my hands to grip both her breasts through her shirt and bra. They’re a nice handful, and I take my time massaging them until she’s writhing on the bed, her hips thrusting up and pussy begging to be touched.

“Has anyone ever told you your body is perfect?”

She shakes her head. “Not that I remember.”

“Fucking fools,” I mutter, squeezing her breasts again. “I could kiss and lick every inch of you all night. I’ll never get tired of exploring you.”

“Ryker,” she huffs, pressing her head back against the mattress. “Please.”

“Please, what?”

“Give me option A. I’m dying for it.”

I chuckle and kiss her belly before dragging my hands down her sides to the button of her jeans. The last time I was in this position, we were rushed and hopped up on adrenaline. Now, I get to take my time. But that doesn’t mean I can’t give her what she wants right now. What we both want.

“Remove your shirt and bra. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Finley eagerly takes her hands down from above her head while I unbutton her jeans. She wiggles and works her shirt off, and I tug her jeans down, revealing her lightly tanned thighs inch by inch until only her white underwear remain along with her beige bra.

“Fuck,” I groan as I study her curvy form in the dim light of the room. Yesterday, we were almost both fully clothed. Tonight... Tonight, I get to see all of her. “Show me your tits. I want to see how hard your nipples are for me.”

Finley flushes but props herself up enough so she can do as I ask. While she reaches around for her clasp, I drag my palms up her thighs, reveling in her smooth skin

against mine and the wet line I see soaking through the crotch of her panties. The musky smell of her makes my mouth water. And when her boobs finally spring free, I think I lose my ability to speak.

They're stunning, just like the rest of her. The perfect size, large but not too large, with dark areolas and pert nipples. Another time, I want to lick and suck them while I finger her, make her squirt on my fingers while I do it. But the view will do for now.

"Lie back against the pillow and touch them," I say huskily.

She scoots back a bit, skin jiggling from the motion. When she's settled, her hands palm her breasts, and I loop my fingers in the band of her underwear while she watches my every move. I place my gaze between her legs as I start to slide the material down, revealing her glistening pussy.

"Shit, baby," I groan as I finish removing them. "I'm going to lick your pretty pink cunt, and I'm not going to stop until you've made a mess of me."

"Ryker—"

My name dies on her lips as I spread her thighs wide, pinning them open so I can place my lips on her. She arches, pussy thrusting into my mouth. I hold her more firmly to lick a path from ass to clit. She cries out, and I groan in satisfaction, licking her again.

"Fuck," I moan. "Best pussy I've ever tasted." I suck her clit, nibbling at it lightly.

Finley cries out again, louder this time. "Oh my god."

I hum and continue to eat, tugging on her labia before I swirl my tongue around her opening and taste her directly from the source. My cock jumps against the bed, and I

thrust my hips to relieve a bit of the pressure. Then I take a breath before burying myself between her thighs once more.

Chapter twenty

Finley

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That's what my tombstone is going to read, and I don't even care. That's what I want it to read.

"Ryker!" I practically scream. "I can't take it anymore, please."

He sucks at the skin of my inner thigh as my hands grip the comforter. He's made me come three times already, a record for me in such a short amount of time. The only person who's ever been able to make me come like this is me—with the help of my trusty wand.

"Please what, baby?" He licks my clit, and his long fingers that found their way inside me after my first orgasm sink deeper in, brushing my G-spot.

"I need you to fuck me like you said. Please, please, please." I arch off the bed as he starts to move his fingers faster, the wet noise of my arousal crude as he fucks me with them.

"Hmm, you want choice C now, Ms. Buckley?"

Ms. Buckley. It sounds so much better coming from his lips while he's giving me endless orgasms than it has any time before. "Yes, please. I need it. I need you."

"Come again, and I'll give it to you."

"I can't."

"You can," he insists.

“Ryk—” His name fades as he suctions my clit back into his mouth. It’s swollen and sensitive to the point I’d jackknife off the bed if he wasn’t pinning me down with his free hand. He hums around my clit as his fingers fuck me faster, going deeper inside me as he adds a third, stretching me wider.

“Come for me, I know you want to,” he taunts, his voice playful and rough. Ugh, god. Why does he have to be playful in bed and good at giving orgasms? I’m never going to want to let this man go.

Ryker’s fingers curl, and he scrapes his teeth gently over my clit as he hits the perfect spot inside me that builds a pressure I’ve never felt before low in my stomach.

“Oh shit, I—” Am I going to do what I think I’m going to do?

“Come on, Ms. Buckley,” he taunts. “I’ll give you extra credit if you soak my beard.”

My entire body seizes, and I feel my orgasm on the brink of exploding, my eyes spotting as he flicks my clit with his tongue.

Given everything that’s happened over the last day, that shouldn’t have been hot. His dirty words should not be what sends me over the edge—“Oh, Ryker!”

He thrusts his fingers deep and sucks my clit hard.

I shatter.

Warm wetness floods down my thighs, my entire body shakes, and a scream I didn’t think I was possible of making leaves my lips, most likely waking up Ezra and anyone close to our room. I should be embarrassed, but my entire body is shaking, and I feel as if I’m floating like a bubble in the summer air.

“That’s my girl.” Ryker’s voice penetrates my blissed-out haze. His tongue laps at my thighs before he’s kissing up my body. His nude form is slick and heavy against mine, but I love the feel of him as he lays gently on top of me, his thick and weeping cock searing my skin.

“Open your eyes, baby.”

I suck in a breath, and he tucks a piece of damp hair behind my ear as my eyes open to meet his. He’s grinning wide, his well-trimmed beard wet and lips pink from his time between my thighs.

“Looks like I got that extra credit,” I say, my voice hoarse.

He chuckles then kisses me, slipping his tongue inside, sharing a taste of my cum with me before pulling back. “Touch me,” he commands softly.

I don’t waste a second before I dig my fingers into his damp hair, tugging on the ends that stick to the nape of his neck. He grunts into my mouth as his dick twitches against me. He kisses me deeper, and I feel some of his precum against my skin. I need to have him inside me again, thrusting and moving so deep I’ll feel him for days.

I release one of my hands from his hair and score my nails down his back, arching into him so my soaked pussy slides over his length. “Fuck me, Ryker.”

He almost growls, tugging my bottom lip and biting down gently before our eyes meet. “Get on your knees and grab the headboard.”

Ryker’s body weight moves from mine, and he helps me up onto my knees. I place my hands on the flimsy headboard and arch my ass back to him as if I’m presenting it to him as a gift. His hand skates down my spine, sending shivers wracking through

me. Then he gently slaps my butt, and I squeal.

“Someday, I want to take you here.” He spits, wet saliva dripping between my crease before he presses his wet thumb to my back entrance. My head drops to my chest, and I lean in to the pressure. “Would you like that?”

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I nod my head in a yes, and he slaps my asscheek again.

“What was that?”

“Yes!” I keen as his thumb slips inside, the sensation new and exciting. But too quickly, he pulls it away.

“Hmm, I can’t wait.”

I stifle a whine and grip the headboard. Ryker shifts behind me, his workman’s hands kneading the skin of my ass, spreading my cheeks apart and opening my pussy so he can admire how wet he’s made me after multiple orgasms.

“I can’t wait to see my cum drip out of you...” He smacks my ass yet again before I feel the tip of his thick cock dragging between my pussy lips. “Can I see it, Ms. Buckley?”

I turn my head to look at him. He’s staring at me intently, his dick in one hand, ready and poised at my entrance, while his other hand strokes my backside. He looks wild with his dark hair mussed, skin slick, and eyes dilated.

I know what he’s asking: He wants to fuck me bare. He knows I’m on birth control—I told him as much—and despite everything, I trust him. I’ve always trusted him. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.

“Yes. I want that,too.”

Ryker's eyes burn with intensity, then, with one powerful thrust of his hips, he sheaths himself fully inside my pussy. My body jars forward from the motion.

"Fuck!" I cry. He feels so hot, and I feel so full. It's exactly how I felt yesterday but even better. In this position, I can feel him in ways I couldn't before. He gently glides out then thrusts back in, all the way to the hilt. "Yes! Just like that."

He holds my hips and continues with the same rhythm, dragging his cock slowly out before thrusting hard enough that I swear I feel him in my throat.

"Goddamn," Ryker grunts. "Your pussy is choking my dick."

He slams back inside me, and this time, he picks up the pace, his hips snapping against my ass and his balls hitting my sensitive pussy at the right angle to brush my swollen clit. I don't know how it's possible, but I feel like I'm going to come again already. It's all too much. He's too much. In the best way possible.

"Ryker," I whine. "God, I'm gonna—" My orgasm crashes over me before I can stop it, and Ryker falls forward, his hips quickening their pace as he slams into me, working me through my release.

"Fuck," he moans. "I'm not gonna last with you squeezing me. It's so good."

One of his hands wraps around my waist, and his fingers find my clit, circling it in a slow motion. I cry his name, knowing that if he wasn't on top of me, I would have snapped my legs closed.

"Be a good girl, and give me one more." He kisses my shoulder.

"I can't."

“You can,” he insists, thrusting into me harder. “Come with me. I want to feel your orgasm milk me. I want you to make me come so hard we see stars together.”

“You’re so”—I take a shaky breath—“dirty.” I exhale on a chuckle and push my ass back into him, his length somehow sinking even deeper, if that’s even possible.

“You make me want to say and do dirty things.” He thrusts. “Now come for me, baby. Give me what’s mine.” His dick hits impossibly deep inside me, and my entire body shudders as I come harder than I have tonight—which is saying something.

Ryker lets out a long groan before calling out my name as he explodes inside me. I feel his warm release fill me up, and the floating sensation from before returns to my body as we ride out our orgasms together, my pussy squeezing his cock like he wanted.

Eventually, Ryker’s thrusts slow. The grip he has on my hip loosens but leaves tingles in its wake at how hard he’d been holding me, hard enough I think he left a mark—or marks. He takes a moment to catch his breath then kisses over my shoulders and down my spine. It’s slow and gentle, almost reverent. After he’s had his fill, he slides his softening length from my body. I go to move, but he stops me.

“You said I could watch.”

Goosebumps appear across my skin, and if I wasn’t orgasmed out, I’d have come again by his words alone.

I dare a glance over my shoulder to see Ryker standing like a god at the foot of the bed, his eyes on my pussy. My inner muscles flutter at the sight of him watching me, which causes his warm release to drip from my sex. He groans, and I don’t miss how his glistening cock twitches against his thigh.

When I think he's finally done looking and my face is burning from his studious gaze, he steps forward and trails a finger up my wet thigh, setting fire to my sensitive skin. Before I can ask what he's doing, he drags his finger through his semen and pushes it back inside me.

My entire body shudders again, and my head drops to my chest. When Ryker seems satisfied he's gotten every drop back in, he crawls on the bed and gently guides me onto my side, pulling me into his chest.

For a while, we don't talk, and all I know is the sound of our breathing and his heartbeat steadily thudding in my ear. When my eyes start to droop and his lips press against my forehead, I force myself awake and look at the old digital clock on the nightstand. It's almost half past midnight.

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“Joey is going to want to sleep at some point,” I say, though he definitely can’t sleep in this bed. We’ll have to get a cot rolled in and open the windows to air it out.

Ryker holds me tighter. “Did you have to say his name right now while we’re both naked together and my cum is inside you?”

The corner of my mouth turns up. “Sorry, but he does have to get back in here. Otherwise, he has to share with Ezra and Hawk. Not that I’d think he’d mind sharing a bed with the latter.”

Ryker’s body stiffens. At first, I think his reaction is because of the possibility of Joey having to room with Hawk and Ezra, because if he does that, the entire team will know for sure that Ryker and I slept together. But then I realize what I said and feel stupid for saying it, because I don’t know if Joey wanted Ryker to know his personal information.

“Ryker, what is it?” I ask, holding my breath in anticipation of his answer. When I feel his body relax, mine does, too.

“Well, shit, I guess that explains Joey’s tall, dark, and smart comment,” he drawls, Southern accent thicker than usual.

My face screws up. “I have no idea what that means.”

“Joey spoke to me before we danced, I apologized for my behavior, and...”

“And what?”

Ryker strokes my cheek and sighs. “Do you promise not to be angry?”

“I can’t promise that, no.”

His breath puffs over the top of my hair. “Fair enough.” He takes a breath. “Joey told me I was being an idiot about you, helped me see what kind of mistake I was making by what I did and told me to go to you on the dance floor.”

My heart warms at his words. Joey is the sweetest person alive, and I love that he did that, even if it was meddling. But he always has the best intentions, and I know he wouldn’t have encouraged Ryker if he didn’t think our relationship could be something.

I look into Ryker’s eyes. “Why would I be angry about that?”

“I don’t want you to think the only reason I apologized is because Joey pushed me to.”

“Is it?”

He shakes his head and squeezes me closer. “No, he may have helped me see what a fucking idiot I was for what I said yesterday, but I already knew it. I just spiraled because of the circumstances.”

I run my fingers through the light smattering of chest hair over Ryker’s pecs. He shivers at the gentle motion, and I smile to myself. “We can talk about our circumstances later,” I tell him, because honestly, I don’t want to think about school or the fact that he’s my professor or our age difference—none of it matters right now. I want to enjoy this moment without all that.

“Okay,” Ryker says.

“But I still want to know what that has to do with the tall, dark, and smart comment.”

He threads one of his toned legs through mine, and I cuddle further into his damp chest, not caring that this room is hot and I’m a literal mess. The motel maid is going to hate us tomorrow when she strips the sheets.

“As I’ve already confessed, my idiot self thought he was flirting with you this whole time.”

“He was,” I tease.

Ryker chuffs. “Yeah, yeah. I get it, but you know what I mean.”

I tug on some of the hair I’m playing with, and Ryker’s cock twitches against my leg. It makes me grin deviously and has him clearing his throat.

“He told me he was bi and that he generally prefers tall, dark, and smart—I thought he meant me at first.”

I cackle. “Oh, Ryker, no.”

His fingers tickle against my ribs gently, and I squirm, shoving him away. He smiles wide, a smile I’ve missed seeing on his face, then he pulls me back into him and places his chin on top of my head.

“Yeah, I get that now. I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

“It was easy to spot if you were paying attention. They were definitely not just tinkering with the rockets together outside the diner earlier, either. They were totally making out.”

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Ryker's chest rumbles. "I don't need that mental image. Hawk is my best friend."

"I'm shocked you didn't notice." I pull my head back to look up into his eyes again. "Does it bother you?" I ask, hoping it doesn't.

"No, of course not. I know Hawk is gay—I've known since we met—but I was too preoccupied with my own shit to realize he was seeing Joey. I need to apologize for that, too."

"Maybe they want to keep things private. I don't know much about their relationship, either—I probably shouldn't have said anything."

Ryker shakes his head. "Joey was telling me without actually telling me earlier. I was too dense to hear what he was saying."

"Hawk won't be upset that we both know?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I'm kind of surprised you didn't know already is all."

"Hawk's always been private about his intimate relationships for a lot of reasons. I'm not surprised he didn't tell me, but I should've noticed. I've been such an ass."

I kiss his chest. "It happens."

That makes the corners of his lips turn up. "I don't deserve you."

I lift my head so our faces are closer together. “Maybe you don’t, maybe you do. But can you hold me? I’m exhausted, and I’m sick of talking.”

His small smile expands wider. “Of course, baby.”

I snuggle into him and sigh against his warm chest while his body envelopes me. “I like when you call me that,” I mumble as sleep starts to pull me under.

“And I like calling you that.” He presses his lips to my hair. “Now, get some rest, and I’ll text Joey and the guys about the room change.”

“They won’t mind?”

“They won’t. I promise,” he assures me. “Now, get some rest.”

I mumble something unintelligible as I allow myself to fall into dreamland wrapped safely in my professor’s arms.

Chapter twenty-one

Ryker

The five of us are standing on the side of the road next to our parked vehicles, a massive wedge tornado ripping through the plains only a few miles from us. The beauty is nearly a mile wide and growing, its black vortex kicking up debris as it eats everything in its path.

“Holy shit,” I say under my breath as I watch its destruction, happy that this tornado didn’t touch down near a big city or a heavily populated area. If it did, there’s no telling the damage it could do.

“It’s perfect,” Finley yells over the wind and tornado sirens going off around us.

My head turns to her to find she’s grinning, chestnut hair whipping around her face and camera in her hands. She lifts it up and snaps several pictures that I know will be stunning, just like her.

“This is the one!” Joey hollers. “I feel it in my knees, y’all!”

“You said that last time!” I yell back, though my tone is playful.

“That was my arthritis acting up. This one is for real—I know it!”

Everyone chuckles at his antics, and I smile wide. In fact, I’m smiling wider than I ever have before, because Joey is right. This is the one. I don’t know how I know, I just do. I feel in my gut that everything is going to go smoothly. We’re going to shoot off the rocket and get our data. After years of hard work and sacrifice, we’re going to make history—and we’ll save many lives in the future with our findings. I’d bet all my money on it.

The wind picks up, and the howling sound of the tornado draws nearer.

“How far is it to the north/south?” I yell to Hawk, who’s standing a couple of feet from me, without taking my eyes off the wedge.

“About a mile!” he yells back to me.

“Alright, this is it!” I clap.

“You really don’t want to come with us, Joey?” Finley asks.

A grin lights up his face as he glances between me and Finley. “Nah, this tornado is fucking epic. I wanna keep the drone in play longer without pulling it back. I’ll catch the next one. Have fun, you two!” Joey finger-guns us before heading toward the truck.

It’s funny how after last night, it seems the guys have easily accepted that Finley and I are together. Not that we’ve had time to discuss anything, but nobody made it weird. Well, minus Ezra giving me a thumbs-up earlier when Finley wasn’t looking and Hawk shooting awe’ll talk laterlook in my direction.

My gaze moves out to study the tornado again, and my ears pop from the pressure change. It’s getting larger and closer by the second. If we want to get the rocket in the inflow band and intercept it, we need to move Thor closer to the direct path. “It’s time to go, Finley. I’ll meet you in Thor.” She nods and jogs off as Hawk approaches me.

“Stay safe out there,” he says.

We have only a few seconds, so I give him a brief hug. This is as much his moment as it is mine. He’s been with me since the beginning. We designed the rockets together, tested them and failed so many times. We built and intercepted our first

tornado in Thor together. We may not be brothers in blood, but we're brothers in every other way that counts.

"You can still drive in closer and launch with us," I tell him.

"I want to track the rocket and get the data, and I've got everything set to go. I feel it like you do. This is it. Go get that tornado, man. We'll celebrate when it's all said and done."

"I—"

"Ryker!" Finley yells, stepping out of Thor. "We need to move!"

"Go, man!" Hawk pushes me.

I quickly put eyes on Ezra, who looks positively elated while recording a video of the storm. He catches my eye and gives me another thumbs-up before I glance at Joey. He's launching his drone and smiling like the goofy and lovable idiot he is.

"Ryker!" Finley calls again.

With a final salute to Hawk, I run over to Thor while eyeing the tornado—it's definitely over a mile wide now and still gaining strength. I jump inside the vehicle and make sure Finley's settled in before I lower the doors.

"To successfully pull this off, we need it to cross the road in front of us," I tell her as I hit the gas, gravel spitting behind the tires as we get onto the road. "If we get too far out of range, we'll miss our opportunity for both the rocket launch and the subsonic sensor reading."

Finley looks down at the computer on her lap. "Stop in exactly half a mile. That

should be the perfect spot to launch.”

“Copy that.” My foot remains on the gas pedal as I look out the windshield. “Just look at her—the base alone...” I whistle low.

Finley bounces in her seat, her gaze following mine. “We’re going to be inside of that.”

“Hell yeah, we are!” I dare a glance at her as I start to ease off the gas. “Are you ready to make history?”

“Never been more ready in my life.” She smiles happily at me, and for a moment, everything around us freezes. I’d thought about Finley being on this chase with me this weekend, but never in my life did I think what we did last night would have come before this moment. But now, I can’t imagine it any other way. This...this is perfect.

“Remember, we have to launch and then get out of there quickly to get Thor where we want for the direct intercept. When we’re back in the vehicle, the harness goes on. Understood?”

“Yes, Professor.” She grins coyly as I bring us to a stop.

A trill of laughter leaves my chest before I press the button that lifts the doors. When I step out of the safety of the armored vehicle, I’m met by strong rain and even harsher winds than before.

Not wasting any time, I hop in the back seat and lift open the hatch where I can reach the launch pad mounted on the hood. Finley stands outside of the vehicle and hands me one of the lightweight rockets that she grabbed from the back. I start to attach it, and she helps me when I ask since she can see the front of the mount better from where she stands. When it’s good to go, she steps back and takes a few pictures of me

with the rocket before snapping more of the storm.

I brand this moment in my mind, wishing I could take a picture of her right now against the backdrop of the green-hued sky. She looks like she belongs here in her jeans and team T-shirt with our logo on it—Ezra must have given it to her—her hair dancing around her face and cheeks red, skin and clothes getting wet from the rain.

“This tornado is incredible!” she yells, but I don’t miss the awe in her voice.

I study the large black funnel, the beauty whipping the debris of farmland and most likely barns and grain silos around with it. “It’s rotating hard and coming right in range!”

“Ryker,” Finley says, her voice high-pitched.

“This is it!” I reply.

Finley snaps another picture then drops the camera so it hangs around her neck. We share a glance, a silent conversation passing between us. She feels it, too—this is going to work.

I jiggle the rocket and have Finley check one more time that it’s all connected, then I tell her to step back. “I’m going to launch.”

“I’m recording it,” she says, holding up her camera again.

I focus on the nearing tornado. It’s got to be only a quarter of a mile away now and moving closer and closer by the second. Dust and rain pelt my skin as I say a prayer to Mother Nature that she’ll continue to cooperate.

When the tornado is a little more than eight hundred feet away, I know it’s time. We have to launch into the inflow band now, then we’ll drive a bit further up so the eye of the tornado will pass right over us and we can collect more data with the subsonic sensors.

“Launching in five seconds. Stand back.” Finley does as I ask, and after one last nod to her, I close the hatch and count down. At zero, I hit the launch button and hear the rocket take off, saying another prayer that it works. After another second, I get out of the vehicle and join Finley outside. She has her phone pointed up at the inflow band, and her entire face is lit up as she keeps her feet planted on the ground, wind battering her curvy body.

“I think you did it!” she cries joyfully.

I look up and don’t see the rocket, but the clouds are dark and rotating, and the rain has started to come down harder and more violently.

That’s a good sign.

“Holy fuck,” I say.

“I saw it go up, Ryker. I think it took.”

At that exact moment, my phone goes off, and I see a message from the TT group chat. I open it to a message from Hawk.

HAWK: Successful launch. Already getting readings!!!!

I share the news with Finley, and she lets out a loud cheer before launching herself at me. I laugh and spin her, the wind gusting around us and water pelting our skin as we laugh. When I set her on her feet, I bring my hand up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

If we had time, I would lean down and press my lips against hers, but we need to get into Thor—our work isn’t done yet.

Chapter twenty-two

Finley

The last time a tornado came barreling at me, Ryker was on top of me, and I was trying to avoid gulping down muddy ditch water while praying we’d survive. Now, safely strapped inside Thor, the fear is different. The whirling gusts slam debris

against the armored vehicle, and the vortex's roar fills the air, but this time, I feel strangely calm as we head the short distance into its direct path—intentionally, this time.

“I still can't believe Joey volunteered to miss this,” I yell over the noise as Ryker hits the gas.

“Who knows? Maybe we'll do this again later tonight. He can come then.”

“One not good enough for you, Tornado Daddy?”

He smirks as he brakes, coming to an abrupt stop right where the tornado is going to pass over us. “You know me, Ms. Buckley. I always want more.”

He leans forward as he says it, and I think he's going to kiss me, but a chunk of debris hitting the car stops him. The vehicle shakes, and the sky outside turns a darker gray, nearly black, as the outer edge of the tornado engulfs us.

“Get the subsonic sensor,” Ryker says so calmly you'd think we were about to get hit with a little airplane turbulence instead of a massive wedge tornado that could easily kill us. I love it, though—I love that he's no longer treating me like glass but as his equal, like he did before everything happened between us.

Ryker turns his attention to buttons on the front dash while I pull the sensor from a box near my feet. Thor starts to make a grinding noise and shakes before ceasing.

“Spikes are in the ground, and windows are secure,” he says as I place the sensor between us.

“Sensor is good.” I tap it gently. Unlike a lot of other sensors that need to be outside, this one will pick up data from inside the vehicle. Makes things a lot easier and not as

dangerous. And unlike the sensor in the rocket, this can only pick up data from the base of the tornado.

“Debris coming from our left—brace, Finley.”

Something hits the car, and I grab the “oh shit” handle with one hand and clutch my harness with the other. My entire body jolts, but Thor hardly moves. The roaring sound of a train is louder than I’ve ever experienced, and my ears popping makes it almost impossible to hear Ryker’s next words.

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“We’re in it, Finley! We’re in it!”

We make eye contact, but instead of fear or worry in his pale green irises—like the other night, when we were running for our lives—I see only excitement and happiness. He smiles then turns his head, and my gaze follows, both of us watching as the black mass overtakes us completely.

Thor rocks, but the spikes keep us level with the ground, and my heart pounds so hard I swear it’s coming out of my chest. I exhale forcefully. “This is fucking insane!”

Ryker laughs exuberantly as my ears pop again. I bounce my gaze from window to window, trying to take in every moment. Wood, grass, rocks and god-knows-what-else fly in front of the windshield, and more debris hits Thor hard. Thankfully, the armored vehicle only shakes, withstanding the beating it was built to take and keeping us safe.

“Woo-wee!” Ryker hollers as if Joey has overtaken his body for a moment. “This never gets old!”

Thor continues to vibrate, and the sound of the train wails around us. My adrenaline is so high, and my pulse is so fast, I’m now sweating. Before I know it, my eyes start to water. I blink the tears back, and then I feel Ryker pulling at my hand gripping the harness. He grasps it tightly in his.

“You’re in a tornado, Finley!” he yells. “You’re in one!”

I let out a loud laugh as more debris rocks the car, and Ryker chuckles alongside me.

I take it all in for another brief moment before the air around us begins to calm, the massive wedge moving on to its next target. It took only a minute or less for it to pass over us.

My ears pop again. Ryker still grips my hand.

I take in several breaths, feeling as if I ran a marathon, and I stare at the small bits of debris and rain that continue to spin around us as the supercell moves further away. The entire time, Ryker and I stay still and silent, held captive by the moment.

When the tornado has traveled into the distance and I can hear the sounds of our breathing again along with the steady beat of the windshield wipers, I squeeze Ryker's hand back and look at him.

"You did it," I say. "You fucking did it."

Ryker's lips tip into a gentle smile as he brings my hand up to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. "We did it."

I smile back, then he pulls his hand away so he can unbuckle his harness. Once he's free, he leans over the sensor between us and brushes a tear I didn't know had fallen off my cheek.

"Are you okay?"

"Never better. That was...beyond words."

Ryker leans closer so his lips are near mine. "I need to kiss you, Finley. Can I?"

My shallow breaths puff against his lips. "The others could come at any moment."

“I don’t care. They can watch.”

I chuckle lightly, and he smiles lopsidedly, his mouth nearly touching mine. Instead of answering him, I press my mouth to his. His lips are slightly chapped and rough from the elements, but I don’t care. My mouth opens to him, and his tongue dives in, coaxing me to open further so he can devour me.

I dive my hand into his hair and kiss him as if this is the last kiss I’ll have for the rest of my life. I have no idea what’s going to happen after today, how Ryker and I will be together or make our relationship work, but I don’t care. He’s all I want right now.

“Finley,” he groans between kisses. “I—”

“Hey! Stop sucking face!” a muffled voice yells. “Us sons of bitches did it!”

I jump back from Ryker and meet Joey’s roguish eyes from the driver-side window. He looks windblown and tired but elated.

“Come on, lovebirds!” he yells.

Ryker’s eyes sparkle playfully as his lips quirk up, and I shrug. “You heard the man. Let’s go celebrate.”

He groans, and I huff.

“We can kiss later,” I add.

Without waiting for his response, I unbuckle my harness and hit the button for my door so it lifts up. When I’m outside, I see Ryker’s truck parked behind us with its headlights on. Ezra and Hawk are in front of it sort of hugging, but it’s awkward because Hawk has a computer in one hand.

Ryker steps out of Thor a second later, and Joey embraces him. “You should see this fucking data, T-Daddy. The twister has still got the sensor all up in her! She’s going to carry it for miles.”

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I laugh at his choice of words but continue my steps toward Hawk and Ezra. Ezra holds his phone camera up to me and says, “Here’s one of our chasers, Finley. She helped successfully launch one of Tempest Trackers’ rockets today. Say hi, Finley.”

I wave awkwardly. “Hi, Finley.”

Ezra chuckles then turns the camera toward Ryker and Joey. Joey shakes Ryker’s shoulders and beams proudly.

“He did it, y’all. Tornado Daddy tamed another twister. But he tamed this one so well, we may be able to tame them for good with all the data we got.” Joey hoots and holds out the front of his T-shirt. It’s another variation of the shirt he had on yesterday, except this one is just one giant image of Ryker’s face with “Tornado Daddy is My Daddy” framing it.

“You can get these puppies on my website at [www dot—](http://www.dot—)”

“That’s enough of that.” Ryker steps in front of him. “Thank god we aren’t live streaming this. Ezra can edit it out before it’s posted.”

Joey winks at me, and I know he’s going to post that website on his personal socials at some point, if he hasn’t already.

“Look at this data, Ryker,” Hawk says. Ryker approaches him and looks at the computer screen. His eyes light up, and he whistles.

“We’re going to be very busy.”

“Hell yeah, we are!” Hawk adds.

The two men embrace before they pull Ezra in to join them. While they all chat and slap each other on the backs, Joey sidles up to me, throwing his arm around my shoulders. “You good, Sharkie?”

“I’m good, Sparkie. You good?”

He woofs in response and squeezes me tighter. “Things are gonna change with this data, Fin. We’re part of something big here.”

I look up at Joey with a warm expression on my face then over at Ryker and his team. Ryker turns his attention to me as if he can feel my gaze and smiles. My stomach flips, and Joey’s words ring in my ears. We are part of something big here today, but the question is: Will I continue to be?

There’s so much left unknown, and it’s not like Ryker and I can be together right away if he continues to work at the university. And if he quits, what does that mean for today’s research and the paper we’re supposed to publish? This specific trip was funded by the meteorology department. What if they find out and pull the plug on the whole thing?

Ryker frowns, and I realize it’s because I’m frowning. I quickly wipe it away and replace it with a smile. There will be time to worry about this tomorrow—for now, I want Ryker and the team to have their moment of glory.

Chapter twenty-three

Ryker

“That’s it, baby,” I croon into Finley’s ear. “You feel so fucking good.”

Her mouth opens in a silent moan as I thrust into her. Her head falls back against the pillows of the motel bed, chestnut hair fanned out wildly as her nails dig deep enough into my biceps that I know she's going to leave marks. Good, I like souvenirs.

"Ryker," she exhales. "I need it deeper."

I stop the forward movement of my hips. "What do you say, Ms. Buckley?"

Her entire body shivers at my use of her formal name, and her reaction makes my cock twitch inside her.

"Please." She squeezes her wet pussy around me, and I fight not to come from the action alone. "Please, Professor. I need to feel you deep."

Fucking hell. This woman will be the death of me.

Finley's eyes open to meet mine, her dark amber depths almost black with need and desire. She's been quiet since our successful rocket launch, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. I'd tried to ask her if something was wrong, but she only forced a wider smile and told me she was good but tired.

When we checked into this motel an hour ago, I thought we could talk, but she jumped me nearly as soon as the door closed. And if there's one thing I know for certain, it's that I don't think I'll ever be able to deny Finley Buckley anything.

I press my forehead to hers and give her what she wants. I thrust deeper with the intention of drawing out her pleasure. The sounds of our coupling are quieter than last night but no less powerful.

"Ryker," she whimpers.

I pull almost all the way out then slide home. Her tits bounce from the force of my thrust, and I can't resist taking a nipple into my mouth. When I suck on it, she cries out, arching into me. I play with her for another few seconds before I trail my lips up her throat and seal my mouth over hers.

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We kiss, slow and messy. She shifts her body so she can wrap her legs around my waist, then she presses her heels into my ass until I nearly collapse on top of her.

I grunt. “Fuck, baby. I’m going to come.”

“Do it,” she pleads.

I kiss her again and slide my hand between us, gliding over her soft stomach until I reach her clit. I circle the swollen bundle of nerves and move my hips in short strokes, our bodies pressed so close that’s all I can manage.

“Fuck,” she moans. “I—

I nip at her lips and growl. “Come for me, baby.”

“Together.”

“I’m right there with you.”

I piston my hips upward and pinch her clit. She falls apart under me, hands and legs clinging to me as she shatters. I breathe out a curse as my head drops to her neck and her pussy clenches my shaft, pulling me over the edge with her. I suck on her pulse as my cum releases inside her, my body buzzing in satisfaction.

God, I want this every day if my body can keep up with her. I want to hold her, kiss her, screw her goddamn brains out, and thoroughly love her like she deserves. Maybe even watch her body grow with my child, if that’s something she wants. It’s

something I never really thought about until now, but with her...the idea of it makes more of my cum release inside her.

When I eventually finish, I exhale a contented grunt then softly kiss her on the lips, rolling us so we're on our sides. I keep our bodies connected and limbs tangled.

"These maids are going to hate us, too," Finley says, eyes dropping between us to where we'll soon be making a mess.

My chest swells with a caveman type of pride. "I'll leave them a good tip. Let the motel buy new bedding if they have to."

Her eyes meet mine, lip twitching in amusement as I tug a strand of her hair between my fingers. We stare at each other for a long moment, our breaths synced and bodies sweaty. The last two times we've had sex, it was hard, dirty, but this was—a hell of a lot different. It felt like...more. And by the soft look in Finley's gaze, I think she realizes that, too.

"Finley, I—"

"Ryker—"

We both speak at the same time. I trail my finger over her cheekbone and open my mouth to talk again, but she beats me to it.

"You go first," she says.

I want to tell her she should go first, but she glares at me. It's the kind of glare that makes me want to take her over my knee. Too quickly, an image of her in my classroom, round ass bent over a desk and red with my handprints, flashes behind my eyes. While that image had been a fantasy of mine that snuck its way into my brain

one too many times, I'd always shut it down before it got too vivid. But now...

"Ryker," she shifts, reminding me I'm still inside her. "What are you thinking about?"

"You." I groan at her movement and hold her still. I'm not ready to leave her warmth yet, but I don't think I can go again so soon. Downsides of no longer being in my twenties. Plus, I do want to talk with her. Really talk, something we've not had the luxury of time to do, especially after the successful rocket launch earlier.

We'd all spent part of the evening chasing another storm that was a bust. We also had to track down the sensor from the rocket. After we'd picked it up nearly twenty-five miles away from where we launched, we stopped at a burger place for food and beer before we found this motel for the night so Hawk could start downloading sensor data and we could get some rest.

As soon as we arrived, I booked the rooms, handing two keys to the guys and letting them sort it out. Ezra snagged the single while Hawk and Joey took the double room, which didn't surprise me given their connection. I even caught Ezra winking at Hawk, hinting he knew about them, too. It hit me once again how self-absorbed I've been, missing what has been happening around me—something I'm determined to change.

I stroke Finley's hair. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing has returned to normal. It was nice that nobody questioned we would share a room. Joey did, however, make a comment about how considerate I was for at least requesting our room be at the other end of the motel so none of them would hear anything. I'd playfully glared at him, but he'd only laughed and patted me on the back like he was proud of me.

Eventually, I know I will have to talk with Hawk and Ezra about my relationship with Finley and what that means for my future. But that will come after Finley and I speak.

Now seems like as good a time as any, because I have ideas about what to do, ones I hope she agrees with.

“I’m going to quit my teaching job,” I blurt out.

Finley stiffens in my arms, her brow furrowing with a frown. It’s an understandable reaction—not just because it was sudden but because I knew she wouldn’t like hearing it. Finley is too kindhearted to even ask me to quit my job. I also know she wants to learn from me, and quitting would seem to mess up that plan.

“Ryker.” She places her warm hand on my chest, right over my tornado tattoo. “You can’t do that.”

“Like hell I can’t.” The words come out quick and harsh before I can contain them, but I need her to know how serious I am about this. How serious I am about being with her.

Finley tries to pull away, but I tug her back. “Please be serious,” she says. “You can’t quit.”

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“I can,” I say more softly this time, placing her hand over my heart. “This is what I want.”

She pauses for a moment, staring at our hands before she continues. “And what do you want exactly?”

“I want to be with you.”

Finley puffs out a breath and casts her eyes downward. “It’s not that simple. Just yesterday, we agreed to be friends, and now you want to quit your job to be with me?”

“I—I thought—” I pause to collect myself. “I thought you would want this. I thought you would wantus.”

She sighs and pulls away from me, both of us groaning as I slip from inside her. When I attempt to tug her back to me, she holds her hand up and gets out of bed. I watch her naked body walk across the small room to the bathroom and stare at her reflection in the mirror as she takes a washcloth and wets it, cleaning between her legs.

It should be me doing that, but I let her do it before she comes back to me, handing me a different towel to clean up with. I quickly wipe myself off, but my chest tightens when she puts on her T-shirt and underwear before picking my shirt and boxers up off the floor and handing them to me.

“Please,” I say. Her eyes meet mine, and that fleeting sad look I saw on her face after

we successfully launched has returned. “Don’t leave.”

She sighs and sits on the bed, easing a tiny bit of the pressure around my heart. “I’m not leaving, but I can’t have a serious conversation when we’re naked.”

I press my lips together and nod. “Fair enough.” I put my shirt and underwear on then shift so I’m closer to her. She’s now propped up against the headboard and pillows.

“Can I at least hold you?” I ask. For a long and torturous moment, I think she’s going to say no, but then she nods. I tug her into me, and more of that weight eases from my chest. It’s odd to think that Finley and I never had a physical relationship before this weekend, because now that I’ve had her, held her, I don’t ever want to stop doing it.

“Ryker, you can’t quit your job. Especially for me.”

I pull away so I can look her in the eye. “The job doesn’t matter. You matter.”

“You love teaching,” she argues.

“I do, but it’s not my whole life. I’ve been thinking about it, and yes, I enjoy it. But I don’t need it. I don’t wake up in the morning because it’s my true calling or passion. It’s something I enjoy, that fills moments in time and gives me a larger purpose. But what if it’s not anymore?”

The implication of my words hangs heavy in the air, and I can feel Finley pulling further away from me. Panic wells in my gut, making me grip her tighter.

“I know I didn’t show you how much you mean to me before, and I was an idiot for how I treated you, how I pushed you away. I’ll regret it forever. But I’d do anything for you, baby. I want to quit.”

She chews on her lower lip. “Do you know how crazy that is? You don’t even know me that well!”

Her words stun me, and my grip on her loosens so she can see me when I say this. “That’s a lie, and you know it.”

She blinks. “We haven’t even been on a date.”

“You think that matters? I know you, Finley.”

“You think you do, but you only know me from class.”

“That’s crap.”

“It’s not!” Her words echo in the small room, and I calmly take a breath before gripping her hands in mine.

“I want you to hear me when I say this.”

“Ryker—”

“Your favorite color is gray, but not just any gray, the gray of the sky during a violent storm. Your favorite snack is apple slices and peanut butter, and you love crispy Diet Coke. Especially if it has crushed ice. You chase storms because your mother loved them, and that’s how you developed your love for photography. Your first chase was at fifteen with your cousin, Jake, who you dragged along with you because he could drive.

“I know you’re kind and generous, giving your time to students who don’t understand something from my lectures. On top of that, you’re incredibly smart, passionate, and a good listener. You wear your emotions, and you say things like they are. You’re a

force of nature, Finley, and I'm in awe of you."

By the time I've finished, I know I could say more, but I don't need to. Finley's eyes shine with tears, and her cheeks are rosy. Her slightly parted lips glisten as her breaths stutter in a staccato pattern.

"I—" she tries, blinking back her tears. "You know all that?"

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My lips turn up softly, and I cup her cheek. “I know you, Finley. And I know you know me. Do you really think I’d quit my job if you didn’t mean something to me? If I didn’t know you? I know you, and I really fucking like you—maybe even more than like you.”

Silence stretches between us, making my blood pressure rise as I wait for her to respond. Different emotions flash across her face like a flip book: awe, disbelief, fear, sadness, and everything in between.

“Finley, baby. Can you say something?”

Her still-watery eyes flutter to mine. “I like you a lot, too, Ryker. I’ve liked you more than I should for a long time.”

My heart lifts, but then her shoulders drop, and the feeling quickly fades.

“If you quit your job, not only will that affect your life, but the school could scratch everything we did this weekend, too. You wouldn’t be able to publish the research paper, and you’d have to raise funds all over again. They helped pay for this round of rocket production as well, right? You could lose too much. I don’t want that to happen to you or your team. They’ve worked hard, too.”

The points she brings up are all valid, but I’m not giving up. “My team are also my friends. I think they will understand once I speak with them. And there are other ways to fund chases, not only with my own money but also with donations and grants. You know I started chasing long before I was a professor, and the university isn’t the only way to get cash flow.”

“And the paper? All the data we got today?”

A prickle of sense tries to push past my Finley-filled brain, but I bat it back. “I’ll figure out a way. The data is too important; they won’t discard it—”

She takes my hands and grips them hard. “No, they might not. But this is what you’ve been working for—”

“There will be other papers. You’re more important.”

“No, I’m not. What you accomplished today—”

“What we accomplished today,” I interrupt, and she almost rolls her eyes.

“What we accomplished today, it’s going to change the way we look at tornados. It could save lives.”

“And I’ll still be part of that. I’ll find a way to make it work.”

Finley huffs out a frustrated breath. “Don’t you understand? I don’t want you to quit your job.”

“Then what do we do? I don’t see another way. If you drop my class, you won’t be able to graduate. If I quit, I know I won’t be your professor, but you’ll still have me. You can still learn from me. I see how hard you work, and I don’t want you to delay your degree or make things more difficult for yourself. This is the easier way.”

“I feel like a broken record, but I’m not the only one who’s worked hard. You worked hard for your job.”

I want to pin her to the bed and make her see that this is the best option. I want to tell

her again and again while I worship her body that teaching isn't my life. That she...she could be my life. "I told you, I want to quit. I want you—"

She stops me. "I hear you, but now I'm asking you to hear me."

I push down my words and nod.

She takes a shaky breath. "I want you, Ryker, I do, but this has been such a whirlwind weekend—we need to step back and think. These are our lives, our careers."

"Exactly, and I don't want those things without you in them."

Finley's eyes soften, and she touches my cheek. "You're a good man, Professor West."

Her words eat at me, and I don't like the tone of them. "What are you saying?"

"That I think we need to take a step back. We have until the fall semester starts back up. You can use this summer to go through the data, get the paper done."

"I'm not going to hide my relationship with you and keep you locked away all summer because of a paper. You don't deserve that."

"I'm not asking you to do that."

I think my heart stops in my chest. I drop my hands so we're no longer touching. "Are you saying you don't want to be with me?"

"I'm saying we need to think about this, really think about it. Maybe you were right to regret—"

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“No, I wasn’t,” I say sternly. “I don’t regret us. The only thing I regret is lying to you in the first place.”

Once again, the room fills with silence, and I fucking hate it. The desire to pin her to the bed grows stronger now. I want to show her how much I don’t regret her, how good we are together. I don’t care about my fucking job, and the more she talks about us parting for it—even if it’s for a brief period—the more I realize I want to give it up. Not just for her, but for me. I have so much in this world I enjoy, that I can be a part of. Teaching is a very small part of me, and I can always teach again in the future, though not at Midland Springs. This doesn’t have to be the end if I don’t want it to be.

I open my mouth to tell her all that I’m thinking, but Finley places her fingers on my lips, a melancholy smile on her face. “I’m not saying we don’t have a future. But I am saying that we need to slow down and think about this. We should at least take time after this weekend to think about everything that’s happened.”

Her words stab at my chest. “Are you breaking up with me?”

She sighs. “I’m not breaking up with you. Especially when we haven’t figured out what we are yet.”

“I know what I want you to be.” My girlfriend and eventually more. I’d book us tickets to Vegas tomorrow if she’d agree to marry me. But that’s not what she wants.

“Like I said, I’m not saying we can’t ever be, Ryker. But can you give me—us—some time? Let’s think about this for more than a day. Can you do that for

me?”

Can I? I want to say no. But as I stare into her eyes, searching them to make sure this is what she really wants, I know I can't deny what she's asking me, because I can't deny her.

So though it pains me, I tip my chin. “I can try.”

Her shoulders relax, and she cups my jaw. “I'm not saying this is over.”

Despite her words, it still feels like it could be. “Okay.”

“Now, will you hold me while we fall asleep? It's freezing in here.” Her lips tip up gently, and I can't say no.

“Anything you want, baby.”

Chapter twenty-four

Finley

“Woo-wee, that was aweekend for the books.” Joey drops his bags on the ground near the front door of his home then pulls Ryker in for a hug before he can protest.

As the two men embrace, I stifle a laugh. Ryker tries to pull away, but Joey holds him firm, smacking him on the back. “I'll miss you so much, Tornado Daddy.”

Ryker's back shakes with laughter as he pats Joey awkwardly. “I'll miss you, too, Joseph.”

Joey jolts back, eyes wide as he holds Ryker's shoulders and grins. “Are you

serious?”

“No,” Ryker deadpans.

A second later, the two men are cackling at their own antics.

“Anywho, give me a call if you want me on your next chase. Like I said, I quit my job, so...anytime.”

“The Storm Prediction Center said we could get a good line of storms coming later this week. Give Hawk a call, and let him know your schedule.”

At the sound of Hawk’s name, Joey truly blushes. Or he’s blushing because Ryker invited him on another chase. Either way, it’s cute as hell, and I find myself smiling despite how ill I’ve felt since my conversation with Ryker last night.

Looking back, I shouldn’t have jumped him when he came into the hotel room, because it made not touching him or being googly-eyed over him today harder. But after the successful launch and all the swirling thoughts in my head, I had a weakmoment where I wanted to be connected with him again. But now, because of me, we’re in a strange limbo.

Since we woke this morning, Ryker has struggled to be cheery. Which means he’s struggled to be the excited and exuberant man he was before our talk last night. He’s done his best, and at least this drive he was nicer than the one before.

We spent the majority of it chatting about the data Hawk’s been starting to analyze. Joey, however, knew something was up between us. He kept staring at me when he thought I wasn’t looking then doing the same to Ryker, burning a hole in the side of his head like he was attempting to read his mind.

“Will do, T-Daddy. Thanks for having me along. I’ve already given Ezra all of my drone footage from the weekend, but I’m going to review it and send over anything I find interesting.”

“Thanks, man.”

They do another gruff hug, and then Ryker steps away so Joey has access to me. My friend wraps his arms around me and squeezes me so tight, all the air leaves my lungs.

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“Don’t be a stranger now, y’hear?” Joey pulls back so he can see my face. “I expect us to chase together at least a couple of times before storm season is over and you start school again.”

I attempt to smile as I nod, because I don’t know what’s going to happen after this. “I’ll try.”

Joey frowns then looks at Ryker. “Will you give us a minute? I need to talk to Mommy.”

A surprise laugh explodes from my lips despite myself, and Ryker groans. “Yes, but only if you never call her that again.”

Joey shrugs, mouth lifting up at the corner. “Maybe.”

Ryker sighs and waves goodbye to Joey, heading toward the truck. When the door closes and the engine starts, Joey tugs us so we’re facing away from the vehicle.

“What’s going on, Fin? I thought you and the professor were good now.”

I stare into his concerned blue eyes, and my chest tightens. “It’s nothing.” Joey stares me down, and I sigh. “We’re figuring out where to go from here.”

“What does that mean?”

I glance over my shoulder. Through the window, I can see Ryker rubbing his face tiredly, and sadness threatens to suffocate me.

I look back at Joey. “He wants to quit his job for me.”

Joey pumps his fist in triumph. “Finally, the man does something right!”

I frown. “I told him not to.”

He groans and places his hands on my shoulders, shaking me gently. “Fin-Fin, why?”

“Because it’s his job!”

“But he said he wants to quit, right?”

“He did, but I shouldn’t be the reason he quits. He has obligations and people he needs to consider other than us, including funding and the paper we’re supposed to write with the data we got this weekend. Those things are important.”

“I get what you’re saying. But what if you’re not the only reason he’s quitting?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know he’s internet famous, and with all the data we got and the fact that the rocket worked, he’s going to be able to do this again—in fact, he’s going to have lots of private corporations and god knows who else up his ass wanting to fund future chases. I also know Ryker is the kind of man that wouldn’t do something if he didn’t want to. He doesn’t do things just to do them. So if he wants to quit, let him. Hell, encourage it. Everything that happens after is white noise that will fade into the background.”

“You make it sound so easy.” I lower my voice. “And I didn’t say this to him, but when people find out we’re together, they’re going to assume a lot of things about us. About me. If he quits, I still have to finish school. What will people think when they

see us together?”

Joey's eyes soften. “Do you really care that much about small-town gossip and what college kids have to think?”

“In this case, I do care about the college kids. They could be my future colleagues.”

Joey dips his chin. “That may be true, but fuck them. If they're willing to make judgments about you or who you date, they're not worth your time. You've also got people in your corner to vouch for your talents and character that aren't Ryker, including me.” Joey pauses for a second before he points to my heart. “More importantly, you know what's true. And that's all that matters.”

I close my eyes for a second to think. Joey's right. Will it suck to have people talk about me and think things of me and Ryker? Yes. But I've never been someone who cares about that before. I just didn't want to feel like I got to where I am because of how Ryker and I interacted prior to this weekend, but I know now that was my fear talking. I deserve to be on this chase, and I proved that I was valuable to the team.

God, why does this whole situation have to be so confusing?

If Ryker and I weren't in this dynamic in the first place, things would be easy. But that's not the case. And while I want to throw caution to the wind and say “fuck it,” I can't. At least not now.

I blow out a long breath. “I don't know what to do. I told him we needed to take some time to think about things before he quits. Have a little breather after this insane weekend. I don't want him or I to do anything rash.”

“I understand that. Though I have to say, if I was you, I probably would have married the guy already.”

I smirk at the image. “You’d make a cute couple.”

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“Damn straight.” He grins before his expression sobers. “In all seriousness, I know this is a weird situation, but I’ll tell you what I told Ryker. He’s a smart man, a good man, but he chose to cross a line with you regardless of the situation. I don’t believe he would have done that if he valued his teaching career over you—I know him enough to know that. And I think, deep down, you do, too.”

My gaze softens, and my lip twitches. “Ryker isn’t the only smart and good man.”

Joey kicks his feet at the ground. “Aw, shucks. People may think I got straw up here, but it’s all brains.” He knocks on his head.

“So many brains,” I say.

He pulls me in for another hug and rubs my back. “I was serious about keeping in touch and chasing together—let’s be more than social media friends.”

I squeeze him back. “Deal.”

Before I can walk away, he stops me again. “Sharkie?”

“Yeah, Sparkie?”

“Don’t worry so much—it’ll all work out. I say, go after your man. Life’s too short.”

“And if it doesn’t work out?”

He shrugs. “Then it doesn’t work out. But if you don’t chase the storm, you’ll never

know if you'll catch it or not."

I smile at his analogy. "And you?"

"Me, what?"

"Are you going to chase your storm?"

A devilish smile appears on his lips, and he tips the brim of his cowboy hat. "He's chasing me, darlin', but I think I'll let myself be caught."

We hug one more time, and I wait till he's inside before I head back to Ryker's truck with too many thoughts swirling in my head. When I open the door, a song by Journey plays quietly while Ryker types out a text on his phone. He looks up at me and studies my face, worry etched across his forehead.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I say, but honestly, I don't know if I am. This weekend has been a lot—more than I ever could've imagined. I'm ready for a long nap and my favorite pint of coffee chocolate chip ice cream.

But there's a part of me that wants to lean forward, kiss Ryker, tell him to quit his job, and insist that we'll figure everything out as we go like Joey urged me to.

Instead, I do the rational thing. I buckle my seatbelt and settle in for what I know will be an awkward drive back to Kansas.

Chapter twenty-five

Ryker

It's been a miserable two weeks since I dropped Finley off at her apartment. We've emailed to discuss the data and structure of the research paper since school is out for the summer, but she hasn't agreed to meet with me privately to talk about it. She's still saying she needs time.

Part of me—the professor—understands and respects her choice. But the rest of me, the part obsessed with Finley Buckley, doesn't get it. I hate that all our interactions have been strictly professional. The only glimpses I get of the real, non-student Finley are in the group chat Joey created for our team (plus himself and Finley) named "TT Upgrade."

Officially, we haven't asked Joey and Finley to join the team permanently, but I know Ezra and Hawk would be on board—so would I. They both made valuable contributions and fit in perfectly with us. But the uncertainty of what Finley and I will decide about our future hangs over that decision—especially when it comes to her place on the team. It's not that I wouldn't want her to join—I want her to join—but I can't be sure she'd even want to.

No matter how I look at it, the limbo we're stuck in weighs on me, keeping me in a constant state of frustration—a fact Hawk is quick to point out after I snap at him and Ezra over a simple question.

"Either quit your job, show up at her apartment doorstep with some grand romantic gesture, or stop pouting. I can't take it anymore, Ryker. You're being a grump—and frankly, it's annoying."

"I second that," Ezra says from beside me.

I scowl at them, leaning back in my chair. We're sitting at my kitchen table with our computers and paperwork in front of us, planning out our next chase while going over data.

“I told you both, she wants to take it slow. Take time to figure things out.”

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Ezra pats my shoulder. “Hate to say it, boss, but this isn’t slow. You’re stuck at ‘Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.’”

“I thought you two were against us being together,” I argue.

“I never said anything about it,” Ezra replies. “I knew you were crushing on her, but you know I stay out of everyone’s personal lives if I can. And now that I’m in it, my opinion is that you do what makes you happy.”

“And I didn’t want you to be an idiot,” Hawk says. “But that twister has already touched down and done damage. Now, you get to pick up the pieces and rebuild. We also like Finley.”

I groan at my smirking friends. “You had to use that metaphor?”

“Sounds like something Joey would say,” Ezra adds giddily.

Hawk shrugs, his face even more of a sly grin now. “Guess he’s rubbing off on me.”

I attempt to not scrunch my nose. I’m glad that Hawk and Joey are seeing each other—or whatever it is they’re doing—but I’d rather not have the image of my best friend having sex in my brain. Ezra must agree because he gags playfully, though like me, he can’t really talk. While Ezra is a hard worker and turns in early to edit and do social media a lot of nights on the road, he has brought his fair share of women to his motel rooms. It’s one of the reasons I didn’t feel bad about him hearing Finley and I that night.

Hawk claps his hands. “Okay, let’s refocus. We’re not talking about me and Joey.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about Ryker being a hormonal asshole instead.” Ezra snickers.

I flex my jaw. “I’m not trying to be an ass, I’m just frustrated.”

“Like I said,” Hawk says, “get off your ass, and go do something about it.”

“And do what, quit my job?”

“Yes,” Hawk and Ezra say at the same time.

“I told you both that Finley doesn’t want that.”

“Are you sure?” Hawk asks.

I stare at my two friends, my hands digging into my thighs under the table. “That’s what she said.”

“I think she’s only looking out for you by saying that. It’s the same thing that you’re doing for her. You don’t want her to have to scramble her life, either,” Hawk reasons.

“And she shouldn’t have to. I’m her professor. I’m the one who crossed the line. I should be the one to have the consequences, not her.”

Ezra jumps in. “Dude, you’re way too uptight about this. You both crossed the line, and she’s twenty-five. You’re not a groomer.”

“That doesn’t mean people won’t think that. We have a natural power imbalance because of our professional relationship,” I say, thinking of the HR policy I’ve recited for so long now.

Hawk groans. “Not this again.”

I cross my arms over my chest. This isn’t the first time we’ve talked about what happened between me and Finley. My team deserved to know the truth and what I wanted to do about it. While Hawk and Ezra don’t work for the school, they’ll be affected by my choice to quit because the school funded our chase. They insist they’ll back me up if I quit, that there will be other ways to fund our research and more opportunities to publish a paper, and I know they mean it. Even so, the main reason I haven’t pulled the trigger on quitting is because I don’t want to upset Finley.

Fuck, maybe I am overthinking.

I rub my eyes tiredly, feeling a headache coming on. “Let’s get back to work.”

“No—no way. You need to make a choice,” Hawk demands.

“I’m waiting for Finley to tell me what she wants.”

“I think you should do it. Show her you’re committed.”

“Then she’ll be upset. I told you—”

He cuts me off. “Make a choice you’re happy with, and then tell her what you decided. No matter her reaction, at least then you know how you can move forward, and you’ll be settled with what you decide because you did what’s right for you.”

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“Hawk’s right,” Ezra says. “Look at it this way: If you quit, and your relationship with Finley doesn’t work out, will you still be happy to move on?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. I can honestly say I would be.

Finley wanted space to slow things down and think things through, so I’ve respected that. For the past two weeks, my thoughts have been consumed by her and my job. If I want to be with her, the best option is to resign. She won’t be my student anymore, and we can be together. I can still mentor her alongside my team. Teaching has always been important to me, but it’s only one piece of my life.

Weather is my life. Storm chasing is my life. And after the success of our rocket launch, our research is on the cusp of something transformative. Storm chasing isn’t just my passion—it’s the work I’m most excited about. It’s work that will take me on more chases with my team—and hopefully with Finley. The thought brings a genuine smile to my face for the first time in days.

“I think you have your answer then,” Hawk says.

“And if Finley becomes a permanent fixture in my life, are you really both okay with it? Not to mention the loss of funding and potentially our research.”

“We’ve gone over this,” Hawk says. “The funding is replaceable. And I don’t think the school is going to throw away the research from this weekend regardless of what you choose. Everything can be worked out, Ryker.”

“No matter what happens, that’s all secondary to your life,” Ezra says, leaning

forward to squeeze my shoulder. “We like Finley, and we want you to be happy. And we’ve already told you we would like her on the team. Joey, too.”

That makes Hawk smile. “Don’t forget that we have your back. We always have. Even when you’re being an insufferable asshole.”

My cheek twitches, and I exhale a breath, my shoulders easing after so many days of tension. “I don’t deserve friends like you.”

“Whatever, man. Would you do the same for us?” Ezra asks.

“You know I would.”

“Then that’s that.”

I sigh. “I really am sorry for all the bullshit I’ve caused—and for being a dick.”

Hawk and Ezra look at each other and nod before looking back at me. “We accept your apology,” Hawk says.

Ezra rubs his hands together. “Now, less talk, more action. The sooner you quit and talk to Finley, the sooner we can make the TT Upgrade Chat official and plan our next chase together.”

My smile mirrors his as I open up my email. “I’ll email HR now.”

“That’s my boy!” Ezra cheers. “Or should I say Tornado Daddy?”

I groan and throw a pen from the table at his chest.

Fuck, I love my friends.

Chapter twenty-six

Finley

“Are you at home?” Jake asks through the phone.

“Yeah, sitting on my couch—at least for now. I’ve been tracking a thunderstorm south of here that I may head out to chase.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, but this one won’t develop into a tornado. I want to go get some pictures for my website.”

“Ryker isn’t going with you?”

The sound of his name makes my chest sting, but I swallow down the emotion. I told Jake everything that happened, leaving out the details he didn’t need to hear. He surprised me by being more understanding than I thought he would be, and he’s been a good ear since I got back from Oklahoma—not that I’ve said much about everything since I first dumped it all on him. I haven’t wanted to.

“Of course not. I told you things are...” I trail off before deciding on the right word. “...weird.”

“You haven’t tried to talk to him yet?”

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“Not about us. We’ve only talked about data.”

Jake goes quiet, the kind of quiet where I know he wants to say something but thinks it will make me mad.

“What do you want to say?”

“Nothing.”

I sigh out my annoyance. “Say it, Jake.”

“It’s nothing really. I just thought you’d have talked to him by now. You’re not usually one to back down from a challenge.”

“Meaning?”

“I know I gave you shit about it before, but I understand things better now that you’ve told me everything. You really like this guy, and you’ve built a relationship with him over the last year that’s real. You wouldn’t have been intimate with him if you didn’t want to be with him.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that the Finley I know would go after him—like you’ve always done with everything you’ve wanted in life.”

I brush my fingers over the healed cut on my cheek. “What happened to you telling

me to be careful?”

I can hear his smirk through the phone. “You screwed the pooch on that one.”

I press my head into my hand. “You aren’t going to tell me to go after someone my own age?”

“I wasn’t lying before. I feel different now that I know everything. You want him, Fin.”

I fidget in my seat, my stomach turning over at Jake’s words. It was almost easier when he didn’t want me to go after Ryker. Now, I’m even more confused, and I feel as if I could jump out of my own skin.

“Just because I want him doesn’t mean it’s right,” I say.

“But it doesn’t make it wrong, either. You said he wants to be with you, that he’d quit his job for you. Maybe you should consider it—”

The desire to jump out of my skin becomes too much, so I cut my cousin off. “I gotta go.”

“Finley—”

“I need to get on the road to catch this storm. I’ll call you later.”

He sighs audibly. “Fine, but I’ll leave you with this. If I had someone who was willing to fight for me the way Ryker is willing to for you, I wouldn’t pass that up—I’d dive in headfirst.”

“Jake,” I say sadly, my heart breaking for him and all his past hurts and rejections.

He's such a good man, one who deserves a partner who sees and loves all of him. I also feel his words deep in my gut—because he wouldn't be saying them if he didn't mean them.

“Don't,” he says quietly. “Don't say anything—I don't want sympathy.”

“I know you don't.”

“But, Fin, please know that no matter what you choose to do with Ryker, I know it will be the right thing, and I support you.”

My eyes well up with tears, and I clear my throat so I can speak. “Thank you. I love you, Jake.”

“I know. Now, go chase that storm of yours.”

I smile to myself, not sure if he means the real storm or Ryker, but I will go with the real storm for now. “I'll shoot you a check-in text when I'm home.”

“You'd better.”

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up, letting my phone fall beside me on the sage-green couch. I've been holed up in my small studio apartment for days, only venturing out for groceries and to pick up a rental car while I wait for my insurance to send a check for my totaled one.

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I'd like to think I'm not leaving because I've been busy editing photos from the chase and going over data, but mostly, I'm spiraling. I haven't even looked at the pictures I took yet, too nervous to see Ryker's face in them. It's why I've only emailed him over the last two weeks, not agreeing to meet him in person. I know if I see his face, my resolve to take some time will crumble—even if it already is. The wall I built is falling down bit by bit.

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling a headache coming on. I don't really need to go chase that thunderstorm, and to be honest, I haven't wanted to chase since I got back from Oklahoma. It will only make me think of Ryker, of how our last chase felt before I blew everything to shit.

That's what makes my sulking stupid, causing me to be more annoyed with myself. If I didn't freak out and push Ryker away, we'd probably be in his truck on our way to chase the storm I've been watching. Together.

I take the old laptop I'm using till I can get a new one—another thing ruined in the tornado—and check the radar I was watching before Jake called. I don't necessarily need to leave now; it's still early in the afternoon, and the thunderstorms will be popping off until late evening. My hand hovers over the touchpad, and both Jake's and Joey's words worm their way into the forefront of my mind.

What they both said was true. If I don't go after Ryker, I'll never know what our life could be like together. And Ryker, despite the hurt he caused me over his initial fear, is willing to fight for me, willing to let go of his job for me. That's no small thing. But what I've been struggling with is that fact that it takes two to tango. Why am I putting everything on him? Why does he have to quit his job?

I drag my eyes away from the radar and track the cursor over a tab that goes to my school email. I click on it then maximize the email that's been sitting in my drafts, one addressed to my school's registrar's office. If Ryker knew I've been considering this, he'd shut it down. Which is why I've kept it to myself.

If I pause for at least a semester—maybe even a year—we can see where things go between us. I'll finish school at a later date, but at least this gives us more time to figure things out before we make more rash decisions. With this option, Ryker doesn't have to quit his job, the paper moves forward without any hiccups, and we can be together.

I'll still feel more comfortable if we don't flaunt our relationship around town, but at least I won't be his student. I know it's not unflawed, but anything we choose to do isn't perfect. At least this way, we're together without the biggest complication.

Yes, I like this plan.

I read the email again, satisfied with how it sounds, then take a deep breath to hit send—

Ping!

My hand pauses over the touchpad, and I look at my phone to see a text from Joey. I pick it up and open up the message. I'm met with a photo that's taken from a distance, but I can clearly see where it's from and who's in it. It's from the bar we went to, and Ryker is holding me on the dance floor. He's gazing at me as if I've hung the moon, our bodies pressed together and our eyes locked.

I trace my finger over his square jaw, chills racing up my spine as if I can feel the coarse yet soft texture of his beard.

Another text comes in, and I suck in a shuddering breath.

JOEY

Are you going to chase the storm, Finney?

I stare at the picture again, but instead of dancing in the middle of an Oklahoma bar, my imagination conjures up what life with Ryker would be like if all my fears weren't in the equation.

There'd be a lot of storm chasing, of that I'm sure. Joey has already prematurely named a TT group chat with him and I in it, something Hawk, Ezra, and Ryker didn't have any qualms about. I also knew from Joey's rambling voice texts that I was valued by the team of men and that they were all rooting for T-Daddy and T-Mama to get together. Which, ew—I'm not being called that. But it was sweet nonetheless and made me feel welcome in a way that warmed my insides.

There'd be a lot of late nights pouring over data and figuring out what comes next after the successful launch of the rocket. We'd be in a car together a lot, spend tons of late nights in shitty motels and eating crappy food.

My eyes stare at the picture again, and my skin tingles as if I can feel Ryker's hands on me right now, the heat of his body pressing into mine, how he kissed me outside that bar and everything that followed after.

Fuck it, I'm going to do it. Ryker and I can figure out all the little and big problems later. I want it all with him. I was just too afraid to let myself admit it.

ME

Yeah, I think I am.

Before I see Joey's response, I put down my phone and bring my cursor back over the send button on my email.

"This is it, Finley." I gently press on the touchpad, but before I can click down completely, a knock at my door startles me.

"What the hell?" I say out loud, holding my hand over my racing heart. I close my laptop and place it down on the coffee table before getting off the couch. I have no idea who it could be. I'm not expecting any deliveries, and Jake would tell me before he drove here from Texas.

My gut twists as I get closer to the door because I think I know who it is. There's only one person it can be. A quick glance through the peephole confirms my suspicions, and my pulse skips from seeing Ryker standing on the other side. I pull back and press my hands over my flushed cheeks before looking down at myself.

I'm not wearing a bra, but my oversized T-shirt is black, which at least means it's not see-through. I'm wearing cotton shorts that are way too short, though.

Ryker knocks again, and once more, I'm left with my new motto: Fuck it.

He's here, and I don't want him to walk away. With a deep breath, I swing open the door and stare into his pale green eyes.

Chapter twenty-seven

Finley

Ryker's eyes meet mine, relief that tugs at my heart and makes me want to reach out to him before he even has time to say hello visible in their depths.

"You're home." He exhales, his resonant voice burrowing deep into my chest.

A small smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. "I am."

His lips turn up to match mine. "Can we talk?"

I nod, standing to the side so he can come in. My doorway area isn't that large, so when he steps through, his chest brushes against mine, reminding me of our bodies sandwiched together in that picture.

"Sorry," he breathes as we shift around so I can close the door.

"It's okay. Let's go into the living area."

He agrees, his burning gaze on my body as we move further inside. Embarrassment colors my cheeks when I realize my place is a mess. Since I've been sulking, it's not like I've kept up cleaning. Thankfully, I threw away the ice cream pints and washed the dishes earlier, so at least there's that.

I turn to face him. "Sorry about the mess." But Ryker isn't listening to me, nor is he

looking at the mess. He's now standing in front of one of my photographs from a storm a few years back, part of a statewide tornado outbreak. I'd snapped a picture of a huge rotating wall cloud over a cornfield that looked as if it was AI generated. It's the photo I'm most proud of, one I never put up for sale in my shop. I don't know why, but I felt like I wanted it for my eyes only. But the way Ryker is looking at it makes me wonder if I should rethink that.

"You like it?" I ask.

Ryker continues to study it, his fingers tracing the flanking line without touching the photo. "It's incredible."

"Thank you."

At my quiet response, Ryker turns to face me. Our eyes meet briefly before he lowers his gaze, taking me in with a slow, appreciative scan. He shifts on his feet, licking his lips in a way that's surprisingly uncharacteristic. He's nervous—and, honestly, I'm glad he is because I'm nervous, too.

I cross my arms over my chest to cover my boobs. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting company."

He clears his throat, eyes reconnecting with mine. "It's okay. I should've called."

"And why didn't you?"

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't answer."

My chest aches, and I take a tentative step toward him, still keeping a short distance between us. "I would've."

Surprise lights his features. “Really?” There’s so much hope in his voice that I almost say screw talking and launch myself in his arms. But if Ryker touches me now, I know there won’t be much talking happening between us.

“Yeah, I would’ve.”

His smile widens, and I motion for us to sit on my couch. Once we’re settled, I can’t help but stare. It feels weird to have him here, in my space. Even in all my wildest dreams, I never pictured him in my apartment. We were always in his office or a classroom or out on a chase. Never here.

It’s funny—I thought he’d look out of place or it would be weird. But dressed down in jeans and a black T-shirt, his ball cap missing and hair tousled as if he’s been running his hands through it, he somehow fits. Sitting on my couch, against the backdrop of my white walls and storm photos, he looks good—almost right at home.

I clear my throat to stop my thoughts. I need to keep a clear head so we can talk, not think about him as a permanent fixture in my space before we even say a word.

“What did you want to talk about?” I ask.

Ryker swallows, the muscles of his throat tightening. His eyes are full of determination as he looks at me. It’s the look he gets when he’s chasing a storm.

“I quit my teaching job.”

My mouth parts as my eyes shoot wide. “You what?”

Since my couch isn’t that large, Ryker takes my hands in his. I don’t pull back; instead, I let him hold them.

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“Baby, you’re shaking,” he murmurs.

I look down at our hands and study them. I don’t have small hands, but his rough ones dwarf mine, and he’s holding them with such gentle care that emotion starts to thicken in my throat.

“I—” I manage to say. “I told you I didn’t want that.”

He tilts my chin up so he can look me in the eye, his gaze soft yet intense. “I know, but I wanted to, Finley. For me.”

My brow knits to match my frown. “But you love teaching.”

“Yes, I do. But there are other things I love more.” He squeezes my hand, and his confession sends shockwaves through my body.

“Ryker—you can’t, we haven’t—”

He cups my cheek, his other hand still holding mine on my lap. “I can, and I do. Maybe it sounds crazy, and you don’t have to say it back, but I do love you. I’ve loved you from the first moment you walked into my classroom, hair a mess and too many books in your backpack.”

My eyes turn watery, and he brushes his thumb over my cheek. “You weren’t supposed to quit. The school—”

“Fuck the school.”

“But the paper, your work—” I counter.

He smiles. “I’ve spoken to HR. I thought I wouldn’t hear back so quickly, but someone called me as soon as I emailed them with my resignation yesterday. You don’t have to worry about the paper; it’s going to be published, and everything will be sorted. Hawk’s already reached out to other organizations and private entities for investing, and I told Joey to put those damn T-shirts up online—he said he’s already got over one thousand orders.”

“You’re serious?” I laugh.

“I wouldn’t joke about that,” he grumbles, though the grumble is more playful than annoyed. He drops his hand from my cheek to my lap.

“Wait!” Worry fills my stomach. “You told the school about us?”

“No, but not because I didn’t want to—because I knew you wouldn’t want me to.” He grips my hand. “But don’t get me wrong. I don’t plan on hiding you away. I won’t do it. I want the whole world to know you’re mine.”

My lip threatens to twitch from his caveman statement, but heat fills my chest. “I appreciate that, Ryker. But is that why you were able to keep everything in order for the paper, because you didn’t tell them?”

“I told you, my only motive for not telling the school about us was for you. I won’t lie and say it won’t make it easier for the paper to be completed, but I told you, there will be more. I’ll go back and tell them about us right now to prove that to you, but please know that I want you. Everything else comes after.”

My sinuses sting, and my chest constricts. He’s saying everything I want him to say. I feel as if I’m in some kind of weird dream. “And do I get a choice in this?”

He grips my hand tighter. “Of course you do. If you tell me to fuck off, I will. But I need you to know I made this choice because I wanted to, and I’m happy with it no matter what you choose.”

I observe his features for any lie, but I can’t find any. Ryker is a man of his word, and I know if I told him to leave, he would. Even after blowing up his life for me.

“I was going to delay getting my degree for at least a semester, if not more,” I confess.

Ryker’s eyes widen. “What?”

“I was about to email the registrar’s office when you knocked, then I was going to call you to talk.”

He gets closer to me on the couch, his body so near his heat warms me. It makes me want to lean in closer and have him hold me.

“Saved by the knock,” he says quietly.

I blink up at him. “I meant it when I said I didn’t want you to have to quit.”

“I know, baby. But if you deferred, we’d be right back here again in the future, trying to figure out what to do.”

“And you’re so sure that we’re going to work?”

Some men would be upset that I implied our relationship could fail after a few months, but not Ryker. His gaze is still soft as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I may fuck up sometimes, and you’ll get angry with me, but I’ll always be the best man I can be for you. I plan on being with you for a lot longer than a semester,

after all.”

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A single tear tracks down my cheek at his words, and he brushes it away. I stare into his eyes, having an out-of-body experience. My professor is sitting on my couch. He quit his job for me. He loves me. And if I'm being truthful, I love him, too, even if I can't say it out loud yet. Not until our relationship feels truly real.

Ryker runs his thumb over my bottom lip. Our bodies have somehow gravitated even closer. All he has to do is lean down a breath to kiss me.

"You were going to defer your schooling for me?" he asks.

"I was."

"And you were going to call me?"

I nod. "I realized I do want to be with you. I was willing to chase you if I had to."

He cups my cheek and smiles. "You've already caught me."

Laughter slips through my lips, and I shake my head in his hand. "So cheesy."

"I'm the Twister Tamer, Ms. Buckley. Cheese is part of my personality."

"Oh my god," I groan. "It is not. Dramatic? Yes. Cheese? No."

"I really can be cheesy," he insists. "And we can talk about that dramatic comment later, but please know I plan to teach you everything about me, Finley. Every single thing."

My laughter fades as I place my hand over the one he has resting on my cheek. My lips part to tell him he doesn't need to teach me anything—I already know him. But I hold back.

There will be time to tell him I know his favorite color is blue, that he rubs his jaw when he's nervous, that he picks tomatoes off everything he eats. Time to tell him I love his overwhelming passion for storms, that he's smarter than anyone I've ever met. Even that I think he needs readers because he squints when he reads documents and textbooks. But right now, I want to show him something else.

“Kiss me, Professor.” Ex-professor?

As if he senses my silly thoughts, a lopsided grin appears on his lips. But before I can smile back, his mouth captures mine. I drop my hand to the base of his neck as his fingers tangle in my hair. We moan into each other's mouths, and I open for him, our tongues meeting in a slow slide. He tastes of mint, and all I want is more. To drown in him after going two weeks without.

“Ryker.” I tug his lower lip between my teeth. “I need you.”

“Fuck, baby. I need you, too.” He groans, pushing me back on my couch so he's fully on top of me, the heavy weight of him settling me for the first time since we parted. His lips find mine again at the same time I grab the hem of his T-shirt, yanking it up.

Ryker's mouth leaves mine so I can pull his shirt off and drop it to the floor, then he's sucking my tongue as I thrust my hips up into his, rubbing myself on his growing erection. He curses against my lips, and I do it again, anxious to feel him inside me.

Over the next few minutes, I get lost in the sensation of his lips, teeth, tongue, and hands peeling off my clothes and worshipping every inch of skin they can. When we're both finally naked, he tugs me to my bed, laying me out on the cream

comforter. He continues to worship me, leaving bites on my neck before licking over my collarbone and sucking one of my nipples into his mouth. I arch up, pressing him into my breast and writhing beneath him.

This goes on for a time before I can't take it any longer. I need to feel fully connected with him again, need to feel his love for me through his body and not just his words. I want to know what it's like to be fully loved by Ryker West when he's not holding back. When we're no longer under the constraints of our forbidden relationship.

"Fuck me, please. I can't wait anymore."

He releases my nipple from his mouth with a wet popping noise, kissing back up my chest and neck. His long, heavy cock drags against my heated skin until he's settled between the cradle of my thighs.

"You want my dick, Ms. Buckley?" He runs his nose along the shell of my ear.

I slide my wet pussy over his length. "What do you think, Professor West?"

His dilated eyes connect with mine, and then he's smirking. We probably shouldn't like using those titles in the way we do, but damn me to hell if I don't admit it's hot. Especially now that we can use them and not be worried about the consequences.

"I think you're a naughty girl who needs to be fucked so well"—he nips at my lips—"that she remembers how to be good."

I arch into his touch and groan. "Do it."

He hums deviously before he kisses me once, then again. "Begme for it."

My nails claw into his back, and I bring my lips to his ear so he hears me loud and

clear. “Please fuck me, Professor West. Teach me how to be good.”

A feral growl rumbles from his throat, and I gasp as Ryker dips his hand between us, fingers brushing over my clit before he takes his cock and sheathes himself all the way inside me.

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We both make unintelligible noises at our bodies joining, and my eyes water from the sensation of him raw and bare. It's like coming home.

"So fucking good," he mutters against my neck.

I wrap my legs around him like I did in the motel room, pulling him closer so there's nearly no space between us. Ryker moves his hips, thrusting inside me in slow, deep thrusts over and over again. I cling to him, and he croons words of praise into my ear as I slowly fall apart in his hands.

"Come, Finley. I can feel you're almost there."

I slide a hand to the nape of his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. He devours me as he continues to thrust, circling his finger over my clit and giving me no choice but to shatter and release.

I cry into his mouth, my sounds swallowed by him as he grunts out his own pleasure. His cum spills inside me, filling me up and sending sparks down my spine.

When he can't hold himself up any longer, he rolls us to our side so we can see each other, our breaths choppy and sweat clinging to our skin. He tucks strands of hair behind my ear as he likes to do, smiling softly. I know there are a million things we could say right now, and we still have important conversations to get to, but there's only one thing that could make tonight more perfect.

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I can't help the smile that teases my lips.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

I bring a hand up to his beard—it’s grown longer than usual—and give it a gentle tug.

“What would you say to a storm chase?”

His eyes light up, and he radiates a happiness that thunders through my entire being.

“You have your eyes on a cell?”

“A squall line an hour from here.”

“Then I’d say...” He sits up, extending his hand toward me. “What are we waiting for, Ms. Buckley?”

My heart skips a beat, and I slide my hand into his, knowing this is the first of many storms we’ll face together.

Epilogue

Joey

ONE YEAR LATER

“That right there is called shit on a shingle.” Four pairs of disgusted eyes stare at me from around my dinner table. Attempting not to laugh, I sit down at the head of the table and grin at my plate of chipped beef on toast. I pick up a fork and dig in, humming around the rich gravy and meat.

When I don’t hear any sounds of forks or eating, I look up from my plate to see my team still staring at me. I bite back another laugh.

“What?”

“Joseph,” Ryker grumbles, and again, I have to stop myself from laughing. I think it’s hysterical when he uses my first name. “This looks like...”

“Shit?” I grin, taking in another mouthful.

“That’s one way to put it, man,” Ezra says.

I swallow and take a sip of my water. “SOS was a family staple of mine growing up. Cheap, easy—my grandpa used to eat it in the military. It’s comfort food.”

Hawk pushes some of it around on his plate. “A comfort to whom?” he asks.

I bite the inside of my cheek. I adore that man, but for someone who eats gas station food on the regular, he sure can be picky.

“Eat it,” I bark at them. “It’s like sausage gravy on toast. You’ll all like it.”

Finley picks up her fork and cuts into her toast. I take another bite as the guys watch her, Ryker in particular. Though he’s more focused on her mouth opening than anything else.

Not that I can blame him. T-Mama is a snack, and I’d be obsessed with her, too, if she were my girlfriend. Hell, I’m kind of obsessed with her, anyway—but in a totally platonic friend way. I’ve got Hawk to keep me warm, and I like his mouth maybe more than Ryker likes Finley’s.

I grin around another forkful of food at the dirty image in my mind and shoot a glance at Hawk beside me. He feels my gaze and meets my eyes, eyebrow lifting. I make a show of poking my tongue against my cheek in a lewd way, and Hawk flushes.

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He's so easy to rile up when it comes to sex. When we first started seeing each other, he was a total prude, and while he still kind of is, I've had that man on the bottom, top, sideways, all the ways. He's fucking glorious. We've also recently made things official. He's my first serious boyfriend, and believe it or fucking not, I'm his, too. That tickles me to no end, and I have Finley and Ryker to thank for it. Had they not gotten together a year ago, I don't know if Hawk would've made the leap.

My dear friend boning her ex-professor is why we're all working together as a storm-chasing team. She constantly reminds me that I could have joined the team without her, but it wouldn't have been the same. And I think Ryker and Finley's relationship being on display in front of us constantly, the two macking on each other and calling each other pet names in the field, showed Hawk that he and I could be more than just fuck buddies. Especially since we have the same age difference as they do.

So yeah, if Hawk and I ever make this thing permanent, I'm thanking T-Daddy and T-Mama in my wedding vows, the freaking horndogs. Not that I'm much better.

I wiggle my eyebrows at my Hawk-man then turn my attention to Finley. "What do you think, Fin-Fin?"

She swallows and wipes her mouth on a napkin. "I like it." Ezra, Hawk, and I turn to Ryker to see if she's lying, and Finley groans. "I'm telling the truth—you don't need to ask him."

"Is she?" Hawk asks his bestie, his fork poised above his food, waiting for his answer.

It's a well-known fact among us all that if Finley lies, Ryker can tell. He has some sort of weird built-in truth barometer when it comes to her. It's fucking weird and cute all at the same time.

"She likes it." He smiles.

Finley rolls her eyes and cuts another bite. "It's good, Joey. It is comforting."

"See!" I say to the guys. "Now eat your dinners, or you don't get dessert."

"Dessert?" Ezra asks.

"Yes, peach pie. Now eat, all of you."

Finley grins at my command, and the two of us share a look that says "these idiots" before digging back into our food.

Eventually, the rest of the guys eat, agreeing that it's good despite its looks, and easy conversation starts to flow. As dinner ticks by, I find myself feeling all warm and fuzzy inside sitting here and sharing a meal with the people I love.

I grew up an only child, and while I had my family, my parents had me later in life, and I'm alone now. This group of people in front of me, they've become my family, which is why I instituted a monthly "family dinner" after we all got comfortable with each other. It's one night a month where one of us makes a home-cooked meal. Sometimes we miss it due to a chase, but we always make sure we have a rain date.

Once dinner is done and the peach pie has been eaten, we all make our way to my backyard where I have a deck with some chairs. It's dark out, and the air is muggy. All the alarm bells in my mind start going off that we might see a twister tonight.

Ryker sits on a chair next to me, and Finley perches on his lap while Hawk sits on the other side of me and Ezra leans over the wooden railing, pulling out his phone. For a moment, I wonder if he's talking to a woman given the way he's smiling, but then I see he's looking at his email.

An easy silence envelops us as the wind picks up, blowing through a wind chime I have hung near the sliding door.

"Holy shit!" Ezra shouts, and I nearly jump out of my chair.

"What is it?" Ryker asks, voice laced with concern.

Ezra turns and holds up his phone. The print is too tiny to see what's on it, but I think I know what it is.

Finley jumps up and claps her hands. "Is it published?"

Ryker stands from his chair and moves next to her, taking her hand firmly in his.

"It is!" Ezra laughs. "Take a look."

He hands the phone to Finley, and she takes it. "Research Paper by Dr. Ryker West, et al.: Rocket deployment of a trackable meteorological probe into the Red Rock EF3 tornado and mesocyclone!" By the time she's finished reading the title, she's practically squealing, jumping into Ryker's arms.

"Have I told you how much I love you, Tornado Daddy?" My nickname for Ryker coming from her lips has the group chuckling. And while the grumpy ex-professor's normal reaction to the name would be to grouse or roll his eyes, he smiles brightly at his girl, love reflecting in his eyes.

“You might have. But please, tell me again—or better yet, you can show me later when we’re alone.”

Finley flushes, and he mouths “I love you” before kissing her sweetly. When she pulls back, cheeks still pink and smile wide, she pushes Ryker toward the rest of us. The group embraces and congratulates each other on our hard work before I go get us beer to toast with.

When I’m back, we stand around in a circle, the faint porch light glowing enough that I can see the excited faces of my found family and boyfriend.

“To us,” Ryker says, lifting up his bottle. “The best motherfucking storm chasers around.”

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We all cheer and laugh, clinking our bottles together before drinking. That paper gave us a lot of headaches, and I know Ryker and Finley are glad it's done and published. We can all move on to even bigger things, especially since Finley graduated recently, completing the credits she needed under a new female professor that Ryker suggested the university hire in his place. Finley even asked her to come on a chase with us later this summer to add more feminine energy—which I think is a great idea.

The team is also glad because we don't have to rely on the school for any funding. All our chases and newly-designed rockets my man and I created have been funded by private donors and grants—and we can't forget merchandise sales. Women love Ryker's face on their tits, and Finley thinks it's hilarious.

After another round of cheers and celebration, we all move to sit back down, but as my butt's about to hit the chair, all our phones go off with emergency alerts. I stand back up and face my team, the lot of them pulling out their phones like I am.

"Looks like that storm cell east of here went severe," Finley says.

I tuck my phone back in my Wranglers and throw my arm around Hawk's shoulder, shaking him a bit in my excitement. "Whaddya say, people? Cap this night off with a little storm-chasing action?"

Hawk gently smiles at me, and I think he's blushing, still not quite used to me touching him in front of everyone. But he'll get used to it, and I know he likes it or he wouldn't be heated the way he is.

"I'm game," Ezra says.

“Sounds like a good way to celebrate,” Hawk adds.

The three of us turn our gazes to Finley and Ryker, but Finley’s looking at Ryker, too, waiting for our team leader to say the words.

He stands a little straighter under our attention and turns the red ball cap he had facing forward to the back, a sly smirk teasing the corner of his lips. Fuck, I love when T-Daddy gets all dramatic.

“Let’s hit the road. We’ve got a twister to tame.”