



False Start (Big Bend Bears #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Vaughn Montgomery High school is almost over, and I'm more than ready. Not because I don't love Big Bend and everything here. Actually, I'm going to miss it quite a bit, but I'll have my best friend by my side. With Austin, I'll always be okay.

Austin Pierce I'm keeping some pretty big secrets from my best friend. Secrets I'm not sure how much longer I can hold onto. Secrets that'll likely destroy our friendship. Because he thinks we're going to college together—but I just can't do it. I can't spend any more time with this lie. Big Bend may have been my beginning, but it never felt quite right. Something was always off—truly, I think it was my false start. Now it's time to live my life with nothing but the truth.

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VAUGHN

I stare at the textbook in front of me, annoyed as all hell that I'm stuck inside right now. It's spring, and it's beautiful outside. The sun is still up, despite it being late in the evening, and I'm missing the last bit of daylight because I'm stuck inside looking at a math book.

I take one last glimpse over at my best friend, camped out on my bed with his own textbook, and I can't hold back the smile on my face. He's so damn content doing math homework, for Christ's sake. I'll never understand the guy, but I don't have to, to know he's pretty much my whole world.

I met Austin on the playground in kindergarten, and the poor guy has been stuck with me ever since. It never really mattered to either of us that I'm the epitome of a jock, and I suppose he's the definition of a nerd—even though I wouldn't call him nerdy. Not really. He loves books, and he hates sports. I've seen nerdy characters portrayed in movies and TV—all awkward and clumsy—but that's not Austin.

He's cool and collected. Totally sure of who he is and who he wants to be. He stands up to bullies—whether they're trying to mess with him or someone else. He's the strongest person I know.

Sometimes I wish I were more like him. I do my best to fit in. Joke around with the guys in the locker room, whether I feel like it or not. Play all the sports the school offers, even though I really only like playing football and baseball. I played

basketball and soccer too and was damn good at them both. I actually would have preferred to spend that time with Austin but didn't want to deal with all the mocking from the other guys in school.

Because they think Austin is a freak for not wanting to play sports. There's not much to do around here, and football is pretty much God. So when a kid refuses to play and would rather read, it puts a bullseye on their back.

Luckily, I've been able to hold it at bay as much as I can. Letting everyone know Austin was off-limits, but he has no problem going toe-to-toe with all the assholes who won't let up. It scares the hell out of me, if I'm being honest. That one of them will get to him when I'm not around—will steal away his spirit somehow.

I don't ever want him to lose that.

"You know even though your scholarship is for sports, you're going to have to do work at college." Austin looks over at me, his light-blue eyes glittering with mirth and teasing.

"I don't plan to major in math," I deadpan, closing the textbook that's resting on my desk and climbing out of the rolling chair I was sitting in. I go over to the bed and drop down next to Austin, resting my head on his shoulder.

Yeah, I'm sure some people would think it's weird that I love cuddling with my best friend—but those people can fuck off. Obviously, they don't have as cuddly of friends as I do.

Although, it kind of makes me chuckle because Austin is pretty much a no touchy sort of person, but he makes an exception for me. He closes his book and wraps his arm around my shoulder, letting me snuggle closer. "You'll still have to do math."

I shrug and breathe in the clean scent of his Big Bend Bears hoodie. He refuses to go to any of the games, but he didn't even blink when I bought him the hoodie for Christmas last year. I kind of wanted to get my jersey number printed on the back—but figured that might be a smidge too weird.

"I can't wait for college," I say honestly. I'm going to miss Big Bend, sure, but it's only two hours away, and Austin will be there.

He snorts at that. "I'm sure you'll rule the campus."

"I don't care about that." I look up at him, bright and happy because that's the way Austin makes me feel. "Just you and me, Austin. Going to college parties and hanging out on campus. It's going to be great."

"You, me, and Van," he says pointedly, like I forgot my own girlfriend or something. I didn't. I'm happy Vanessa is going to college with us too, but I mean—it's always been Austin and me. There's nothing wrong with being excited about us going to college together, like we always planned.

"Yeah. I know," I say a little defensively. "Van will be there too. It's going to be great."

He snorts again, shaking his head at me. "Most guys would be pretty excited their girlfriend is going to college with them, man."

I sit up a little, still staying close to him. "I am excited."

He's studying me too closely now, and I hate that he knows me so well. I huff as he cocks his head to the side. "What's wrong?"

Damn him. I huff again like a petulant child and lean back against the wall my bed is

on. “She’s pissed because she wanted us to live together.”

He looks a little surprised by that, his mouth forming an adorable little O. “She wanted to move in together?”

I nod, still a little shell-shocked by that. Van is great. I really like her, and we’ve been dating since our freshman year of high school. But moving in? Is she crazy? I’m not ready for that. “I told her I have to live in the athletic dorms my freshman year because of my football scholarship, but she thinks I could get special permission or something.”

I squirm in my seat, feeling itchy, just thinking about it. Moving in with someone—living with them all the time—that’s a huge commitment. Especially when you’re eighteen years old. But she seems hopeful about it instead of freaked-out. Like it was always supposed to be the plan or something. “What did you tell her?”

“That I didn’t want to rock the boat with the new coach.”

His lips purse together, and he doesn’t look too pleased—like he wants to say something but is holding back from me. I hate when he does that. He has to know he can tell me anything by now.

“What?” I ask, trying to force him to talk to me.

“Nothing,” he says and leans forward, unzipping his backpack and putting his math book in there before zipping it back. “I should probably get going. It’s a school night.”

“No, don’t go. Mom is making fried chicken for dinner.”

He laughs at that, and that beautiful, bright smile I’ll never tire of is left on his face

when the sound stops. “You know my mom can cook too.”

“I do.” I jump off the bed and grab his hand. “We’ll go to your place for dinner tomorrow! Come on. I can smell the chicken already, and I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” he chides but lets me lead him out of my room and toward the kitchen. My mom doesn’t look surprised at all to see us walk into the kitchen while she stands by the stove.

“Smelled dinner, huh?” she teases.

“You know it.” I kiss her cheek. “What can I do to speed up this process?”

She laughs at that, a full vibrant laugh and points to the cabinet. “Set the table.” She looks at Austin. “I’m assuming you’ll be setting a place for my favorite child too?”

Austin blushes at that, and my little sister, Carrie, walks into the kitchen at that moment. “You mean me, right, Mom?”

My sister is a sophomore in high school—sixteen and a total hellion, but she’s a good kid who actually gets along with our parents pretty well. “Sure, sweetie,” Mom says, kissing Carrie’s forehead and then winking at Austin, who just chuckles.

Carrie and Austin continue to joke around about being my mom’s favorite child as we set the table. My dad walks in, just in time from working at my uncle’s cattle ranch a couple of miles away. He looks tired, and his boots, which he takes off by the back door, are muddy, but he’s happy when he kisses my mom hello and then sits down at the table with us.

I love these nights at home with my family. I’m going to miss it when I go to college, but I have no doubt Austin and I will make our way back here at least once a week.

So I still can't wait.

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AUSTIN

O h. No.

Not again.

I crack my eyes open, though I already know it's not a dream I'm currently experiencing. I really do have my best friend's arms wrapped around me, his morning wood poking into the small of my back. His bare, warm chest pressing against the skin of my back.

I fell asleep in his bed again. I'd planned to go home after dinner, but Vaughn talked me into a walk before the sun fully went down and then wanted to watch Netflix in his bed afterward.

I should have gone home. I know that, but the temptation was just too great. So I stripped out of my hoodie, shirt, and jeans—down to my boxer briefs—and watched shamelessly as Vaughn did the same.

We've been doing this for as long as I can remember. I've been waking up to Vaughn's boner poking me for years now, but while his is a simple morning wood most guys experience, mine is not so innocent.

I can't stop fantasizing about my best friend, and he has no idea. "Vaughn." I wiggle in his arms, but he just tightens his hold on me, pushing his hard dick even harder

against my back. And fuck my life—my own cock twitches hungrily between my legs.

What I wouldn't give for him to actually mean it. But I know he's dead to the world right now.

I try again. "Vaughn, I have to get up."

"Sleeping," he says, wiggling even more against me and holding me tighter. The guy is going to kill me. Seriously. I might stroke out if he doesn't stop touching me. He's an affectionate guy. Always has been. Loves to cuddle and snuggle, this big, oblivious moron.

Said with love, of course.

"You have to wake up. We have school."

"Don't wanna," he mumbles against the back of my neck, sending needy shivers throughout my body. I'm going to need at least an extra ten minutes this morning to jerk off before school or I'll be hard all day.

Shit, I probably will be anyway. And ten minutes is a great exaggeration because I'm already close to being there.

"Vaughn, come on. Let me go."

"No way. Warm. Stay." My heart squeezes tightly in my chest at his request, and I have to close my eyes and try to remind myself he doesn't mean it that way. We're friends. He's straight. Totally and completely straight.

This is so unhealthy.

“I have to go home and change before school.” I grab his forearm and try to pry it off me, but he just laughs and holds me tighter. Damn jocks and their delicious, stupid muscles.

He’s starting to stir more and more awake, but he doesn’t release me. “You should just bring some clothes here and leave them.”

“Sure. You won’t live with your girlfriend, but you’d be fine with me moving in here with you.” That’s right, folks. He has a girlfriend. And I’m lying here in his bed that smells like him, with his arms wrapped around me.

I tried to make it sound like a joke, but I feel him stiffen behind me before he finally lets go and sits up, rubbing at his eyes. “You know that’s different.”

Do. Not. Look. At. His. Chest.

I have to force my eyes to stay on his face—which, if I’m being honest, isn’t much better. Vaughn is absolutely perfect every-single-where. His face is movie-star handsome with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. Full red lips and dark-blue, soulful eyes surrounded by long inky lashes. It’s not fair. He should have some sort of flaw, but he doesn’t. Trust me, I’ve looked.

“Sure,” I grumble because of course it’s different. We aren’t in a relationship. He’s in a relationship with Vanessa, and he doesn’t want to live with her. But I’m just his buddy. His pal.

Goddamn, I need to get a grip.

I start to leave his bed, but he stops me with a hand around my wrist, keeping me there. “What’s wrong? You seem grumpier than normal this morning.”

And... I just looked at his chest. I mean, that's just not fair. He's sculpted. I mean everywhere. He has strong pecs with just a hint of dark chest hair with pink dusty nipples and then stupid—and I mean stupid —abs. Six of them. Defined and perfect with a light dusting of dark hair trailing from his belly button down to the top of his tight, black boxer briefs.

Holy shit, I could come just looking at him.

"I'm fine," I say, pulling my arm away gently and standing up, then grabbing my shirt and hoodie to cover my crotch because my dick is still 100 percent hard, and I'm hoping he doesn't notice. "I just hate being late. I didn't mean to fall asleep last night."

He shrugs. "We've been sleeping over at each other's house since we were five. It's no biggie." He lies back on the bed, reaching his arms up and covering his eyes with them, leaving his body on full display for my traitorous eyes. His biceps bulge, and I want to lick them.

Yup. Time to go.

"Take my truck, and then come get me."

I have my own truck but rarely drive it because Vaughn likes to ride together. Austin and Vaughn. BFFs. Forever and always. Even if I die a little inside when I think about how we'll never be more than that.

"You better not be late."

He waves me off, snuggling back into his pillow.

"Vaughn."

“Won’t. Promise.” He’s starting to drift off again, but whatever. I’ll drag his ass out of bed when I’ve showered and maybe gotten a little smidge of relief. I wave a quick goodbye to his amused-looking parents and hop into Vaughn’s truck, driving the quick mile down the road to my house.

When I walk through the front door, I see my mom sitting on the sofa, sipping her coffee, wearing a similarly amused look as Vaughn’s parents did. “Stayed at the Montgomerys’ again?”

I shrug, feeling a blush creep over my cheeks. “Yeah. Sorry.”

She waves me off easily because, of course, she’s unbothered. “Oh please. I think your friendship is so cute. And besides, you’re eighteen.” Yup, I’m officially an adult with a ridiculous crush on his best friend.

It’s so not cute. Sometimes, it’s crippling, feeling this way about my best friend. I try to tell myself it’s because I’m gay and I live in a small town that still believes in traditional values . Whatever the fuck that means. That I’m just fixating on Vaughn because he’s good-looking of course, but he’s also the best friend I’ve ever had. I’m safe with Vaughn.

Unless I mess it up and let him know about all the crazy feelings I have about him. Feelings that are unrequited.

Feelings that are dangerous.

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VAUGHN

A h, school. I do love school. I love this town . I'm going to miss it like crazy when I graduate next month and then leave for college after summer. But at least I'll have my best friend with me.

"Get off me." Austin shoves me away when I wrap my arm around his shoulder.

My very grumpy best friend. I laugh, "Aw, don't be like that."

Austin's light-blue eyes narrow in my direction as he fills his backpack with the books he needs from his locker. "We're way later than I wanted to be."

"And yet, the bell hasn't even rung yet," I point out unhelpfully, but I'm still grinning because it's cute he thinks he can be mad at me. It wasn't my fault my bed was all nice and warm, even after he left it this morning. Anyone would have fallen back asleep.

He closes his locker door, and I'm sure he's about to rip into me again for making him late, but he tenses briefly when we both hear a familiar voice coming from behind us. "Uh-oh. Did he make you late again, Austin?"

Van.

I grin as I turn around to greet her. She's dressed for spring in a pair of short jean

shorts that could probably get her in trouble and a Big Bend Bears jersey I gave her from my freshmen year.

“You know it,” Austin says. “He’s your problem now.”

Van laughs at that, amused, I guess. “Yeah right. We both know we share custody.”

I roll my eyes. “You both know I’m right here, right?”

They just share an amused grin with each other. I’m a lucky guy, if I’m honest. My best friend and my girlfriend get along really well. Usually, their time together is spent making fun of me, but I’m a big boy. I can take it.

It’s clear too that Vanessa is still pretty annoyed with me for not wanting to move in together our first year of college. But I mean... come on. That’s crazy. Yeah, we’ve been dating for a while, but we’re still really young. I’m not ready for that kind of commitment, and I really think she’ll understand when she’s done being pissed.

We all start walking down the hallway toward our first classes of the day. I don’t have any classes with Austin until the afternoon—the fucker is usually in the advanced courses—but I do have one with Vanessa first thing.

“I can’t wait for college. No more waking up early.”

“Who’s going to tell him?” Vanessa asks Austin, nudging him in the arm with her elbow.

He just shakes his head and sighs. “He can probably schedule most of his classes for the afternoon.”

“I’m pretty sure college football practice starts at the ass crack of dawn a lot,” Van

says, and I frown.

“Well, fuck.”

They both laugh at my annoyance. I see a couple of people I know and nod to them as we pass, making our way down the hall. Yeah, I’m really going to miss this.

“You going to go to some of the football games with me?” Van asks, and I realize she’s talking to Austin. We’ve stopped walking because we’re right outside his first class. “We can make fun of the jocks together.” She waggles her eyebrows at him, and he smiles.

God, I love that smile.

It’s one of those things that’s hard-won, but so damn beautiful when you get to see it. “Yeah, I don’t know about that.”

“You know Austin and the sports,” I say, grabbing him around the neck and ruffling his hair. He laughs but pushes me away.

“They are pretty damn boring.”

I scoff, placing a hand over my heart in mock horror. The funny thing about Vanessa is she’s a cheerleader, but she does it in an ironic way, I guess. She wears dark eyeliner and even had pink hair our sophomore year. She’s edgy and cool but really talented when she’s cheering for her favorite player, if I do say so myself.

Before any of us can say another thing though, Austin is shoved into my side when bigass Calvin comes barreling down the hall. I know instantly that he did it on purpose, and being twice the size as my best friend, he could have really hurt him.

I reach out and grab the collar of his shirt and slam him against the locker. “Watch where you’re going, asshole.”

“Vaughn.” I hear Austin, but I just see red. It’s bullshit how the guys at this school treat him. They always have. He’s on the smaller side, and he doesn’t like sports. At. All. He doesn’t quite fit in here, but that doesn’t mean they get to bully him.

Calvin may be as big as his brother, Curtis, maybe even bigger, but I’m meaner when it comes to my best friend. How do they not know that already?

“Vaughn. Don’t.” I hear Vanessa, and Austin has made it to my side.

I don’t look at either of them though, my attention is still focused on Calvin. “Apologize.”

“Fuck you, Montgomery. I’m not saying anything to your boyfriend,” he sneers, looking at Austin with pure hatred and disgust. I want to strangle this fucker.

Austin doesn’t shrink like a wilting flower, but he doesn’t taunt Calvin like my friend Benny would have. Curtis was always all over Benny, thought it was hilarious to tease him and pretty much everyone else about being gay. Even though Benny isn’t—or wasn’t—I’m not really sure how that works because he’s in love with a dude now.

Doesn’t matter to me.

But it does matter how they treat Austin. Curtis finally graduated, and now I have to deal with his younger, dickhead brother. “Say. It.”

“Vaughn, we’re going to be late for class. Let him go.” Austin’s cool tone soothes me mildly, but I’m still hot all over and full of rage. I saw the big fucker coming, but it

was too late. Why do they have to single Austin out? Especially this one? He seems to really have a hardon for my best friend.

“Say. It.”

Calvin is turning red with exertion, struggling to get out of my hold, but it’s not happening. “Whatever.” He looks over at Austin, a look I can’t quite place but I know I don’t like on his face. “I’m sorry I barely touched you and you flew into your boyfriend here.”

I tighten my grip on his collar. “That wasn’t good enough.”

“Let him go, Montgomery.” Fuck. It’s Coach. I look over to see Coach Zimmerman with his big arms crossed over his chest. He has a whistle around his neck because even though he’s the football coach, he’s also the gym teacher here at school.

“Fine.” I release him, and he clutches at his neck dramatically.

“Get to class,” Zimmerman says to Calvin, who doesn’t waste any time doing so. I look at Coach, who doesn’t look pleased but doesn’t send me to the office either. Just gives a quick nod and heads down the hall.

“Are you trying to get expelled right before graduation?” Austin asks, and it’s clear he’s pissed.

“He hit you on purpose.”

His lips purse, and yeah, he’s definitely mad at me. He looks like he wants to say something else, but he just huffs and heads into his classroom.

Well, fuck.

I turn to look at Vanessa, who looks even less amused than Austin did, her arms folded and her eyes narrowed as she shakes her head. “You have to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” I start to walk toward our classroom. “Calvin rammed into him as hard as he could. He does that shit all the time.”

“And Austin can handle himself. He doesn’t need you making a scene. It makes it worse.”

I disagree but am smart enough not to do it out loud. “He’s my best friend.”

“Yeah. I know,” she says, and is that sadness I hear in her voice? That can’t be right. She loves Austin almost as much as I do.

I don’t ask her to explain. We just go in and find our seats, but I can’t help thinking about Austin while I’m in class. I hope he’s okay. I don’t know why Calvin singles him out so much.

And he’s told me before he doesn’t want me to stand up for him. Which, to me, is totally crazy.

There’s no way in hell I’ll ever stop doing that.

AUSTIN

“What are you doing here?” I look curiously at Vanessa as she walks to where I’m sitting in the bleachers. I’m sitting up high, not really paying attention to the baseball field—except, you know, when Vaughn is up to bat, and I may watch how he swings. I can’t help it that his biceps do this bulging thing when he swings the bat. The guy is only wearing a t-shirt with the sleeves cut out, showing off the side view of his stupid abs, and gray sweatpants that should be illegal.

I try to calm my raging libido as Vanessa sits down next to me. She looks cute with her hair up in a ponytail and running shorts on. “Track practice ended early.” She looks out at the field and then back at me. “Guess this means you’re stealing my boyfriend again tonight?”

It’s said in a teasing way, with absolutely no malice behind it, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s there somewhere. It has to bother her. It has to. “Uh, we rode to school together.”

She laughs, leaning her elbows back on the bleacher behind us, her face turned up toward the sun. “Why am I not surprised by that?”

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly, but I’m not really sorry. I should be. And I should put some distance between Vaughn and me, but I don’t seem to have it in me.

Still, she does seem a little sad.

“You okay, Van?”

She lifts her head to look at me, her eyes sullen. “He told you, right?” I cock my head to the side, waiting for her to tell me what she’s talking about, even though I have a good idea. Vaughn tells me a lot of things. “That he doesn’t want to live together.”

Yup. That’s what I thought. And what I really, really don’t want to talk about. But Vanessa is my friend—even if she’s dating the man I’m in love with.

That’s really not her fault.

“He did.”

She nods her head slowly and sits up. “I swear, I’m never quite enough for him.”

“That’s not true, Van. He loves you.” And it kills me to say it—twists my stomach into knots—but I know he does. Vaughn could have any girl at school—they flirt with him shamelessly—but he barely even notices them.

He’s never strayed. Not once, and if anyone would know, it would be me. Vaughn is loyal to a fault.

“He doesn’t want to live with me. You should have seen his face, Austin. He was horrified.”

“That’s just Vaughn. I love my best friend, but he’s kind of clueless. It probably never occurred to him that you may want that someday.”

“Well, he knows now, and he still said no. So what does that tell you?”

I start to pack my books away in my backpack when I see practice is wrapping up,

but I keep my attention on Vanessa. I don't want to be in the middle of their relationship, but I was kind of put here naturally. "It tells me you guys are eighteen. There's time. You don't have to get married and have babies right away just because this town usually dictates that."

She frowns at that, looking out onto the field, and I follow her gaze to where Vaughn is drinking out of his water bottle. Water pours down over his chest. I think he's doing it on purpose to cool down, but then he continues to gulp the water down. His white t-shirt is see-through now, his abs apparent between the sunlight and the water. I hate that my mouth waters.

He sees us both and shoots us a grin, which seems wider than his handsome face, and waves. We both wave back.

"I'd totally have his babies though," Vanessa says in a husky tone I really don't need to hear.

The thought of her having his babies sends a slicing pain through my gut, and I stand up to try to snuff it out. "I'm sure you will, Van."

She stands up too. "I'm going to go kiss him goodbye before you two head out."

"You could come too, you know," I blurt out the invitation. What the hell am I doing? It hurts to see them together, so I'm just going to double down and expose myself to that tonight?

She just laughs though, swinging her backpack over her slender shoulder. "Can't. I'm going to Katie's, and she's not a huge Vaughn fan."

I frown. "Why not?"

She pats me on the shoulder. “Calm down. Obviously, I’m a huge Vaughn fan.” She shrugs. “Katie’s just my best friend, and she thinks I can do better than being a third wheel.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My tone is sharp, but Van doesn’t flinch.

“You know what it means, Austin. You saw him this morning. He’s feral for you. Always has been. Always will be. Sometimes, I think you two are soulmates.”

I swallow hard, nerves and fear slicing through me. Does she see it? Does she know how I truly feel about her boyfriend? My vision gets a little blurry, and I worry I’m going to have to sit back down. “We’re friends.”

But then she laughs, like I’m acting ridiculous. “Yes. I know that. And a little too straight.” She winks at me, and I can feel myself pale as I try to smile— fake it, damn it! Don’t let her see .

“Right,” I barely choke the word out, and I hope I’m not acting too weird.

She sighs and bumps into my side with her arm. “There’s such a thing as platonic soulmates though, and that’s you and Vaughn. If he ever had to choose, it would be you, and that’s what Katie means.”

“Vanessa...” I start because she’s kind of killing me.

“I don’t mind though.” She turns to me with a bright, killer smile. “You know I love you too. We’re a little unconventional, but I’m cool with it.”

I grimace because she so wouldn’t be if she knew I jerked off in the shower today, thinking about her boyfriend. That I do that often. As often as I can because it quells the undying need for him for a few moments.

“He loves you,” I say again, more for my benefit than for hers.

Her eyes search mine for a brief moment, and she never stops smiling. “I know, silly. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She shoves my shoulder before she bounces down the steps to greet Vaughn, who has his arms out for her before she reaches the bottom step.

I watch as he wraps his big arms around her, holding her close and kissing her before she playfully shoves him away for being sweaty. She leaves with a quick wave to me and one more kiss for him before he runs up the stairs to me. “You mind waiting for me while I shower? Apparently, I’m totally gross,” he says with a smile that kills me.

“Nope. I’ll wait,” I say and sit back down on the bleachers before he heads into the locker room, and I try not to picture him showering because that’s just creepy.

I need to tell him soon.

Really soon.

Because I can’t do this anymore. I can’t go to college with him and watch him go through his life with me by his side—but never having his heart.

5

VAUGHN

“Thank you, Mrs. Pierce,” I say when Austin’s awesome mom hands me a plate to take with me to his room. I’m beat after school and practice, and thankfully, Mrs. Pierce doesn’t have the we only eat at the table rule, like my own mom.

Good choice, going to Austin’s after school. Though, when my broody best friend walks into his bedroom with his own plate, he kind of makes me rethink that. I don’t know what’s up with him lately.

I mean, he’s always been the strong, silent type, but it’s getting worse lately. Like he can barely look me in the eyes sometimes. It has me worried, and if I’m honest, I don’t worry much. Never have.

He kicks off his shoes and plops down on his bed next to me, our backs against the wall as we sit with our plates on our laps. “What’s bugging you?” I chance asking him because I really want to know. Maybe I can fix it.

I’m good at fixing things.

He huffs. “Seriously?” He takes a bite and chews. “We just had this talk this morning.”

“Yeah.” I take a mouthwatering bite of my own and chew before speaking. “But I don’t think you really answered me earlier. I know I don’t have your brains, but I’m

not totally dumb. I know when something is up.”

At least when it comes to him, I do.

“Nothing is wrong.” His eyes meet mine. “I promise.” And there it is. He’s lying to me. I’ve always been able to tell. Why is he lying to me? In the past, if he’s lied—it’s always been about dumb stuff, like not being sick when I totally know he’s sick. The guy does not like to admit it.

Oh God, what if he’s like really, really sick?

“I’m fine,” he says, probably noticing I’m freaking the fuck out. But he’s my best friend. He can’t be sick. “I promise. Had a physical a couple of weeks ago, actually, and I’m all good.”

I let out a relieved breath. “Why did you have a physical? You don’t play sports.”

That gains a laugh from him, and I cherish it. “You know people other than jocks go to the doctor too, right?”

I shove his arm. “Shut up.”

He laughs, and we eat in quiet for a bit, but I still know something is bothering him, which means something is also bothering me until he tells me what’s going on. I think about this morning and Calvin purposely ramming into him.

“Is it Calvin?”

“What?” He shakes his head at me. “No. Of course not. Why?”

“I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

That gets a small chuckle. “Like he wants to kill me? Thanks, buddy. Glad you don’t like that.”

I shrug instead of laughing it off though. “I don’t know. It’s more than that. I can’t really explain it, but I can’t shake it either.” His palm slides over my forehead, and I bat him away. “What are you doing?”

He grins at me and drops his hand. “Just making sure you’re okay. You’re thinking awfully hard over there.”

“Fuck off.” I do laugh this time though. I turn my head to look at him, trying to be serious for once, even though it’s not really my thing. I’ll try for him. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“Yeah.” He takes a bite of his homemade roll and looks deep in thought as he chews. “I really can’t.”

The pain I feel in my chest nearly knocks me over. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? You’ve always told me everything. We tell each other everything.”

“It’s nothing.” His eyes meet mine, and I can tell he wants me to drop it, but no way that’s happening. He’s keeping something from me. We don’t do that. He knows better than that.

“You’re my best friend. You can’t keep secrets from me.”

“I am,” he says cryptically but offers nothing else. What the hell? A sense of dread washes over me. Is he lying about not being sick? Is it his parents? My mind goes over a thousand scenarios in a minute.

“Is this about a girl?” That could be it. I mean, Austin isn’t a player by any stretch.

The guy doesn't seem all that interested in girls at all. We were all chasing girls before even hitting puberty, but my best friend was always just content reading a book. Maybe that's it. Maybe he has a crush on some lucky chick at school.

"No," he answers way too fast.

"Oh, come on. It's for sure about a girl. You finally have a crush, am I right?" I nudge him.

"It's not about that."

I rub my shoulder against him again, prodding him to open up. Girls—well, at least one girl—but dating in general, I feel like I'm pretty good at. I've had a steady girlfriend for years. This is something I can help him with. "Come on. I told you everything about me and Van." I mean, I don't give details, but he knew the first time I kissed her. When we went a little further. And even when we awkwardly lost our virginity to each other last year after prom.

I felt like such a loser—not being totally psyched afterward. Thinking I messed it all up, and he was there for me. He's always there for me.

I want to be there for him now. "Yeah. And I wish you'd stop," he says with a sly, teasing grin and bumps his shoulder into mine.

"Tell me."

I don't know why it's so important—it just is. "Nothing. Can we please just drop it?" He's looking at me, pleading with me to let it go. Everything inside me is screaming not to do it, but I don't want to push him. He'll tell me when he's ready.

I guess.

“Fine.” I shrug and dig back into my food. But I don’t want to keep things quiet for too long. “Let’s talk about college then. You sure you want to live in the dorms? You could get your own place. You know, so I can crash there when I want to.”

I expect him to tease me about being codependent or not being able to sleep without him, but instead, his whole body goes tense. He looks guilty.

What the actual fuck is going on?

“Uh, yeah.”

“See, something is up. What the hell is going on with you?” I’m really worried now. Something is wrong. Very wrong. I search my brain for something—anything—that could be bothering him.

He’s been doing this lately a lot, freezing up when I bring up college. “New topic,” he says, pushing me farther away.

Fine, he doesn’t want to talk about this. I’ll just bring up a subject he hates, so maybe we can come back to this. “There’s a party on Friday. Come with me.”

I’m preparing for the fight. Austin hates parties almost as much as he hates going to games. He doesn’t drink. He doesn’t party. Honestly, it’s one of the many things I like about him. It makes him unique. But I’m not telling him that.

“Okay.”

I stare at him in shock, almost dropping my plate. “What?”

He just shrugs. “High school is almost over. I guess I should go to one of these stupid things my senior year.”

I think my jaw hits the floor. “You never go to them.”

“Hence, why I should.”

“O—kay.”

He grins. “Okay.”

Well, fuck. That backfired, but at least I get to bring my best friend along to a party.
That’s a win, right?

6

AUSTIN

I can't believe I said yes to this. What the hell was I thinking?

Okay, I know what I was thinking—that I wanted Vaughn to stop talking about girls and college. Because I'm lying to him about both and have been for quite a while. Maybe I could handle just one secret, but two? It's killing me.

I've known I was gay for a long time. When all the other guys in our class couldn't stop talking about girls, my eyes were firmly on Blake Stevenson—a senior when I was just a freshman. One I had an insane crush on and who likely would have crushed me if he ever knew.

Although, crush is probably not the right term for it. I didn't want to date him, and I wasn't hopelessly in love with him. I just thought he was hot and kind of had a staring problem every time I was around him. It was nothing like what I feel for my best friend and what I've tried to push away for so long. I've tried like hell to deny my feelings for Vaughn. It's lucky no one knows my secret.

Well—make that almost everyone—Calvin is here, standing across the fire from me, and his eyes are locked-in. His threatening gaze is a bit much, if you ask me. It's not like I want to be at this stupid bonfire party. I swear, what are they thinking?

More than half my classmates are drunk off their asses and dancing around an open fire—great plan.

I shoot Calvin a sharp glare, hoping he'll get the hint and stop looking at me, just before Vaughn wraps a protective arm around me. He's grinning with a beer in his hand, but it's his first one, and he doesn't seem to be inebriated at all. Just happy. Because that's Vaughn.

Vanessa is standing on his other side, a beer in her hand, and her friend Katie stands next to her—glaring at my best friend. I can't say I totally blame Katie because Vaughn's attention is frequently on me. But she has to know it means nothing. Because to Vaughn—it does mean nothing.

"I'm going to go grab a water out of the truck," I say, pulling out of Vaughn's hold, and he starts dancing happily with Vanessa and Katie. He better not fall into that fire—but knowing him, he'd probably jump right back out and be totally fine.

Nothing touches Vaughn, and honestly, thank God for that.

I walk over to the truck and look around for water, leaning over the driver's seat. When I finally grab a bottle of water and stand right up, Calvin is right there in my space. "What?"

I try to shove him back, but he has me blocked in. It's clear he's had way too much to drink tonight, and this is so not what I need right now.

"Move."

He leans into me, and I can smell the alcohol on his breath as he gets in my face. "You better keep your fucking mouth shut."

Oh, here we go. "You really think I want anyone to know?" I place one hand on his shoulder and try to shove him backward, but he doesn't budge. "Move."

“I think you like to run your mouth. Always with a snarky remark. Always judging us jocks. Running to your little boyfriend.”

I roll my eyes but look over his big shoulder to where Vaughn is still dancing and having a great time. “You and I both know Vaughn isn’t my boyfriend, but he’ll kick your ass if he sees you threatening me. So you better move.” I don’t love using Vaughn in this situation—I can handle it, but I know it will escalate if Vaughn looks over here right now.

“We both know you want him to be though.” I feel sick at the putrid smell of his warm breath. I can’t believe I ever let him kiss me.

“And we both know what this is actually about.”

“Fuck. You.” He shoves me back, and I do move, nearly falling back into the truck. I drop the water bottle. “I’m not gay.”

“Yeah,” I deadpan. “I know. You just fell, and your lips happened to fall against mine.” I shrug, goading him. “Happens all the time.”

He grabs my shirt, pulling me into him. “You little shit. Don’t you say a fucking word, you hear me?”

I brace myself for getting punched right in the face, my right eye closing so I don’t have to watch it coming. But it never does because Calvin’s grip on my shirt is gone, and he’s falling to the ground when Vaughn comes barreling into him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

This is exactly what I was afraid of.

Calvin, of course, doesn’t stay down. He moves right back into Vaughn’s space—too

stupid to not go toe-to-toe with Vaughn when he's this mad. "This is none of your business, Vaughn."

"You were about to hit my best friend. That makes it my business. What the hell is your problem?"

"Vaughn, stop," I try, but he's foaming at the mouth. Poised for a fight.

"No." He looks at me over his shoulder. "I don't know what's going on, but I know it's something, and it has to do with this asshole."

"Who you calling an asshole, asshole?" Calvin shoves Vaughn's shoulder, stupidly poking the bear.

"Don't," I say to Calvin as I grab Vaughn's arm and make him look at me. "I told you to knock this shit off."

Katie and Vanessa are near, but most of the rest of the party are unbothered. The music is loud, and I'm grateful for it. I don't want a scene. "I'm never going to stop standing up for you."

"See, this is what I mean, Van. Are you really going to spend the rest of your life watching your boyfriend defend Austin?"

Katie pisses me off, and I send her a sharp glare. "I didn't ask him to."

"No. I know." She tosses her hands up. "He just runs to your rescue any time he thinks his little Austin is in trouble."

"Why are you busting my balls?" Vaughn looks over at Katie, who has clearly had a lot to drink but isn't fall-down drunk. She's just defending her friend, I try to remind

myself. He looks at Van. “Why are you letting her?”

“Seriously?” Van asks and folds her arms over her chest, annoyed, and I can sense one of their epic fights brewing—one where poor Vaughn doesn’t even have a clue what’s going on. This got out of control really fast.

“Look, it doesn’t matter.” I try to bring the attention back to me. “He’s an asshole.” I gesture to Calvin, who’s still seething. “But I can handle it.” I look over at Vanessa. “Why don’t you take Katie back to the party. Have fun. I can handle this.”

Vanessa doesn’t seem nearly as irritated with me, but I don’t think she wants to leave either. Katie for sure doesn’t. She’s ready for the fight, and Vanessa is smart enough to know it, so she leads her away.

I turn back to Calvin. “You need to leave me alone.”

“No. You need to back the fuck off before I smash your face,” Vaughn adds totally unhelpfully.

“I have it handled, Vaughn.”

“Aren’t you two just adorable?” Calvin taunts, and I see the mirth playing in his drunken expression.

“Shut up,” I command, my blood pumping a little more. Afraid of what his drunk ass might say.

“What’s your problem with him?” Vaughn’s jaw is pulled tight with tension and anger as he steps into Calvin. “Leave him alone. I won’t tell you again.”

“You know...” Shit. I can feel it coming. It’s like a trainwreck, moving slowly as

Calvin cocks his head to the side and sizes up Vaughn. “He’s not your boyfriend. He’s not yours to protect.”

Vaughn grabs his shirt and slams him against the truck. He’s a few inches taller than Calvin, and right now, it might as well be an entire foot. “He is mine to protect. That’s where you’re wrong.”

I hate that my dumb little heart stutters in my chest, hearing him say that. Hearing him claim me like that. But I try like hell to remind myself it means nothing. He means just as a friend.

“Is that your problem, Calvin?” No, Vaughn. Don’t. I’m screaming internally but can’t get the words to work. “You want him? You can’t have him.”

My eyes flutter closed and then open again as Calvin turns his gaze toward me, fire burning in his eyes. “You told him? You’re so fucking dead.”

He tries to lunge at me, but Vaughn has a good grip on him, and he’s pinned to the truck. “Told me what?” Calvin looks shaken as he looks at me and then Vaughn. He doesn’t say a word, and Vaughn’s eyes slide carefully to me. “What’s he talking about?”

It’s like I’m underwater, my ears full of fluid, and that weird rushing sound takes over. “Nothing,” I choke out.

He looks back at Calvin. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He takes advantage of the moment and shoves Vaughn backward, making him stumble but not fall. “None of your fucking business, Montgomery. Back off. You know nothing.”

They stand like that for a moment, in a silent standoff, and I want to die right then and there. Because when Vaughn's eyes meet mine, I know he knows.

"God, why can't you just leave things alone?" I ask, defeated, my knees threatening to buckle.

Calvin stumbles away, and it's just Vaughn and me, staring at each other.

Two best friends since childhood, but in this moment, total strangers.

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7

VAUGHN

I don't know what the hell is going on—or maybe I just don't want to. What did Calvin mean by that? Why was he so worried that Austin told me something? And why is Austin so upset?

It's like... I know the truth... deep inside, but I don't want to face it, so when Austin directs me into the truck and gets behind the wheel, I just follow numbly. Climbing into the passenger seat, we're both silent until he gets on the highway toward our houses.

Calvin is a prick. And maybe I wouldn't have picked up on anything he was saying without saying it if it weren't for the way Austin looked. Like someone punched him in the gut. I've never seen my best friend look so pale and sickly.

"Tell me," I say quietly, but Austin remains silent. I turn to look at him as he drives, the moon the only light in the cab, but I can see him. His blond hair is mussed, and his eyes are focused on the road. "Talk to me, Austin," I plead with him because I don't care. I don't. I just need him to trust me enough to talk to me. Always.

He says nothing, but he does flick his blinker on and turns off on a dirt road. He pulls over to the side and parks, looking at me, but staying totally silent. He shakes his head, and I can see his chin trembling.

Is he afraid?

“Austin...” My voice is quiet, but he shakes his head and then climbs out of the truck. No way I’m letting him get away. So I scramble out, nearly falling but catching myself, and slam the door, following after him as he walks down the dirt road. “Stop.”

He swings around, his eyes on me. “What do you want to know?”

I stop walking, and he remains still, his eyes locked on mine as I try not to mess this up. It makes sense—if I was really paying attention to it. It makes perfect sense. How did I miss it? “You know what I want to know. Tell me.”

“You need me to say it?” He takes a step into me.

“Yes.” I take a step closer to him. I know I’m not the brightest, but I should have picked up on this.

“Why?” He shakes his head, looking so lost. I just want to pull him into a big hug and never let him go. He has to know I have his back.

“Because you’re Austin. You’re my best friend. And we don’t keep secrets.”

He snorts dismissively at that, but I don’t take it personally.

“At least I don’t.”

His shoulders drop, and his eyes narrow. “That’s not fair. This is different.”

“How?”

His laugh isn’t his real laugh. It’s ironic and sarcastic—not a laugh. “Because this is Big Bend. Because you’ve seen it with Benny. With Dallas.”

Him mentioning the two guys in our school who have recently come out pretty much cements that I'm not wrong to assume. "I won't let anyone treat you bad."

"Vaughn." He takes a deep breath and lets it go, but I don't think he feels any more relieved. "You have to stop trying to protect me. He's right. I'm not yours to protect."

I step into him now, grabbing his arm, but not too hard, just enough to keep him looking at me. "Bullshit."

"I'm gay, Vaughn." He looks up at me. "And I hate it here. I can't wait to leave. It's torture being here."

My heart squeezes tightly in my chest as I think about what he's telling me. What I've known for a long time—at least the hating it here part. "We're going to college. You're going to get out of here."

His chin drops, and his eyes are on the ground. "I am."

Why won't he look at me?

"I don't care that you're gay. Do you really think that matters to me? Who cares if you're into guys instead of girls? I should have picked up on that. But why didn't you tell me?"

It's not fair to feel so betrayed, I'm sure, but I do. We tell each other everything.

"It's Big Bend," he says as if it's an answer, and he still won't look at me. It's bothering me more than it should. What other secrets is he keeping?

"So? I don't care about that shit. Benny's my friend."

“Not your best friend.” His eyes finally meet mine, and I can see they’re shimmering with tears he hasn’t shed. “Your friend who you cuddle with and sleep in bed with. Who you tell everything to. It’s different.”

“Yeah. It is.” He looks hurt for a moment, and I kind of want to strangle him. “That means I’ll have your back, no matter what, and you can trust me. Always. You know that. How could you keep this from me?”

“I didn’t want you to hate me.” His voice is so quiet, I nearly miss it.

I pull him into a hug, holding him tight. “And I thought I was the moron in this friendship.”

That finally gets a little laugh from him, and I smile. He hugs me back, and I hear him snuffle. “It changes things.”

“No.” I hug him tighter, breathing in his familiar scent, letting it ground me. “It doesn’t.” I pull back enough to look into his eyes. “It doesn’t, Austin.”

“I’m gay, Vaughn. You’re really going to tell me you’re fine sleeping in the same bed with me? Calvin is a ticking timebomb. It’s only a matter of time before the rest of the town knows. You think it won’t be embarrassing for you to hug me in public? People will talk.”

“Let them,” I say firmly because I really don’t give a shit about that. I’m not gay. I have a girlfriend. But if people want to talk, it’s not really my problem.

He pushes out of my hold and takes a step back, looking at me like I’m naive. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. You don’t see the world...” He stops, and I take a step closer.

“Like what? I don’t see the real world?”

He sighs. “No. You see the best. You’re an optimist, and I like that about you, but sometimes that’s dangerous. It wasn’t easy for Dallas. He ran, and he was right to. Benny—he’s something else entirely.”

“Benny is fine and happy. I just want you to be happy. It’s clear that keeping this secret was making you miserable. I don’t get it.”

“I know you don’t.”

“So tell me,” I say, finding a large tree trunk that fell over at some point. It’s sturdy enough to sit down on, so I do, and I pat the spot next to me for him to join. Thankfully, he does. “What happened with Calvin?”

“He kissed me.” I grimace, and Austin picks up on it. “Seriously? Squeamish already, hearing about two guys kissing?”

I shove his arm but grab him when he nearly falls over the large tree. “I made that face because it’s Calvin. Fucking gross. You can do better.”

He studies me carefully, looking into my eyes, and then seems satisfied that I’m not lying to him. I’m not, for the record. I don’t care about two dudes kissing. Kiss who you want, when you want, I say. I just can’t believe he doesn’t know me better than that.

“It was once. I was waiting for you after football practice and got mouthy with him. Wanted him to go the fuck away, but he got worked up and wound up kissing me.”

Hot rage flows through my blood, thinking about Calvin’s lips on Austin. “I’ll kill him.”

“Jesus.” He shoves my arm, but I don’t move, thanks to hours of lifting weights and years of sports. “You have learned nothing.”

“Not true. Learned my best friend is gay and apparently has terrible taste in men tonight. I think I learned a lot.”

“Shut. Up.” He smiles—and it feels like I can actually breathe again when I see that. He nudges me, and I pull him into me, letting his head rest on my shoulder.

“Nothing changes,” I say firmly and hold onto him just as hard.

“Vaughn . . .”

“No,” I say quickly. I guess I can understand why he’d think I’d want things to change. That I’d be freaked-out about being half naked and sharing a bed with him when I know he’s into guys. But even being a meathead, I know gay guys don’t want to bang every guy they see.

He doesn’t see me like that. We’re best friends. We’re still Austin and Vaughn.

“Let’s go to my house. We can watch a movie and hang out until we fall asleep.”

He lifts his head and looks at me, weary and broken. I hate that. I want the smile back. “You know it can’t be like this forever, right?”

I stare at him, confused by that. Because as far as I’m concerned, nothing is ever going to change. Nothing needs to change. But I’m tired of arguing with him.

I nod and stand up to take his hand to lead him back to the truck.

Because I’ll just have to show him.

8

AUSTIN

People are definitely talking. Of course they are. Calvin and his big mouth. I should have known people weren't totally minding their business at that stupid party. I shouldn't have gone.

After we drove back to Vaughn's house, it was just like it's always been. We were greeted by his parents, grabbed a snack, and headed up to his room. He didn't hesitate pulling his t-shirt off and kicking his jeans off before climbing under the covers.

I nearly had to poke my own eyes out to keep from staring at him, but I managed it as I did the same and got under the covers. I tried to keep a distance between our bodies, but Vaughn was having no part of it.

He doesn't get it.

He stares right now as we walk through the halls, all eyes on us. He doesn't understand the rumors that have been spread all weekend. But he's about to because here comes Vanessa, and the worry is written all over her face.

But instead of going straight to Vaughn, she stops right in front of me. "Is it true?"

My throat goes dry, and I lock up. I can deny it. Say that Calvin was drunk—which he was—and just talking shit. Or I can just be honest. But I don't get a chance to speak because of fucking course, Vaughn is ready. "Is what true?"

He does a pretty good job of sounding like he has no idea what she's talking about, but her eyes don't move from mine. "You can tell me. We're friends, Austin."

I know she knows too. That the rumor started to make things click. I don't want to deny it. I'm so damn tired of lying and keeping parts of myself secret. My head starts to nod before I open my mouth. "Yeah."

I feel Vaughn's worried eyes on me, and it feels like the whole school is watching, even though I know most people aren't paying attention to us. I'm not sure how I expected Vanessa to act, but it sure wasn't her wrapping her small arms around me and pulling me into a hug. "It's going to be okay."

I hug her back, but just barely. Vanessa and I are pretty much in the same don't touch me unless you're Vaughn club. Always have been, but she's hugging me. She doesn't seem mad or freaked-out at all. "Van..."

She pulls back and looks into my eyes. "I should have seen it. I'm sorry you felt like you had to hide it." She's keeping her voice quiet, and her eyes scan around the halls as she pulls back a little more. "I'm really sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" I ask carefully. Oh God, does she know about my feelings for Vaughn? Is that pity I see in her pretty eyes.

"I don't really know," she says with a watery laugh. "I heard what Calvin was implying, and it just all clicked in my head." Her voice is a whisper now, and the hallway is noisy with people getting to class. "You never wanted to date, even when I offered to fix you up with my friends, and I should have known."

I grin. "Lots of people don't want to be set up with your friends, Van. Doesn't make them gay."

She laughs and shoves me in the chest. “Shut up.” She looks over at Vaughn. “So you didn’t know either?”

Vaughn’s perpetual smile fades a bit now, and I hate that. “No.” His eyes meet mine. “He didn’t tell me either.” I can sense the betrayal still there, but he has to understand this wasn’t about him—not really.

“Why not?” Vanessa is looking at me now. “Why didn’t you think you could trust us? We’re your best friends.” She’s next to Vaughn now, and he wraps one arm around her, pulling her protectively into his side. Great. Now I have two of them staring at me like I kicked their puppy.

“It wasn’t about either of you.” I open my locker and try to keep myself busy, switching out books in my bag because looking at them, standing there together, both worried about me, it’s not doing good things to my insides. “It was about this town. And the way we all grew up. I’m not stupid. I know Big Bend isn’t as progressive as the rest of the world.”

Vaughn reaches out and pushes my shoulder. “You know Van and I will always be there for you. It’s not a big deal to us.”

I hang my head and slam my locker door closed. “I know that. But it is to me.” I turn around. “This is my life and who I am. It’s a big deal. And it was mine to tell, and it’s my business, Vaughn.”

I look at him, and yup, there’s that look of deep hurt. “You could have trusted me. I wouldn’t have told anyone.”

“He’s right though,” Vanessa says to Vaughn before looking at me. “I’m sorry. It’s not fair that you were outed before you were ready.”

Damn, she's cool. I really hate it.

"Aw, so what, are you three a throuple now?" I really hate the jocks at this school. This time, it's not Calvin but one of his friends—Robbie. Total meathead. Loves to follow the pack.

"Jealous, Robbie?" Vanessa asks, reaching one arm up around Vaughn's neck and sliding the other around mine. "You want to be in the middle of this delicious man sandwich?"

She waggles her eyebrows suggestively at him, and he turns bright red, stuttering, "Shut up, Vanessa. You know I'm twice the man they are."

"Not even close. Maybe you're jealous of Austin because you really want Calvin all to yourself."

I turn to Vanessa. "Thanks for that, Van."

She laughs and kisses my cheek. "It was a burn on Robbie. Not you. You can do way better than Calvin."

"Agreed," Vaughn says, and I look over at him, a small smile forming on my lips because even though I wasn't ready for this—maybe I never would have been—but if this is going to be the new normal for the last month of school, I know I'll be okay.

Van and Vaughn have my back, and I should have known they would.

"So it's true then?" Robbie looks at me, his face twisted in disgust. "You're really a... a..."

"Watch the next word out of your mouth," Vaughn says, stepping forward, and

Vanessa's arm drops off both of our shoulders.

Robbie pales a little when Vaughn approaches. Can't really blame the guy. Vaughn has that look on his face. "Gay?"

"It's really none of your fucking business," Vaughn bites out, and I look over at Vanessa to see if she's going to pull Vaughn back. But unfortunately, she just looks geared up for a fight also.

"I am," I say, just having enough of it already. I look around at all the familiar faces that I've known since kindergarten and hold my arms out wide. "I'm gay. Always have been. Surprise!"

I feel Vaughn's heavy hand fall on my shoulder and squeeze, smiling brightly at me before looking out at the small crowd around us. "If anyone has anything to say about it, you can talk to me. I love to talk."

I shove him away. "Stop."

Vanessa laughs and wraps her arms around his neck. "I think it's pretty sexy when you get all macho." She's teasing him, but he kisses her anyway, and that's my cue to get to class.

I appreciate both of them, but I cannot watch them suck face.

It feels pretty good having this one secret out though. I head to class, leaving Vaughn and Van to it, and it does feel lighter in a way—even though I can feel eyes on me.

It doesn't matter.

There's no worry about someone finding out about it anymore because everyone

already knows.

I hate that in the back of my mind, I wonder where the hell Calvin is today. There's no way he's handling this well.

I was right. For sure. It's been three days, and Calvin hasn't been at school. It's not that he loves school or anything, but he does love baseball and all the sports. So him missing practice and knowing he likely won't get to play in the game on Friday—yeah, that's a big deal.

Now I just need to convince Vaughn I can handle this part alone. Not an easy task. “Hey, you think Van can give you a ride today?” I ask him as we head out to the parking lot. He doesn't have practice this evening because he had it this morning—sports are weird.

“What? Why?” Vaughn looks worried, and here we go.

“I just... uh, have something I need to do.”

He stops walking entirely now. “What? What's wrong?”

“God, Vaughn, we don't have to spend every minute together.” And when he winces, I feel like a total dick. “Sorry. I just want to go check on Calvin.”

His entire body stiffens now. “What? Why?”

“Because it's been three days, and he hasn't been at school. I'm worried.”

“Do you actually like him?” He looks pissed-off, and I can't decide if it's because he hates Calvin or if it's because Calvin is a guy. I don't want to think that way about my best friend—but he's straight, and this is Big Bend. No matter how cool he's

playing it, he may not be all that okay with this.

“No. He’s a dickhead.” He looks partially relieved but still concerned. “I just... being outed sucks.”

He seems to think that over for a moment, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder. “But you did kiss him...”

It’s kind of a question and kind of a statement. I’m not sure what he wants from me right now. “You really want to talk about this?” I ask, starting toward my truck again.

I get to the door, and he moves to the passenger side, even though I tried to hint that this is a solo mission. He opens the door and climbs in. I huff and slide behind the wheel but don’t start it up. “I want you to talk to me. And I’m not letting you go see Calvin the dickhead alone.”

I roll my eyes. “I can handle him.” But I start the truck anyway because I’m not going to win this argument.

“So, do you like him?”

I grip the steering wheel and start toward Calvin’s house. “No. Not like that, I don’t. And not in any way. But I know what it’s like to hide who you are. While it made him angry, and he was a total dick to me, I can kind of understand it.”

“I can’t.” Vaughn folds his arms, and I try not to laugh at him, but he’s being ridiculous.

“That’s because you’re the town’s golden boy. Doing everything they deem right .”

He frowns and drops his folded arms. “You know I’m not perfect.”

I laugh and shove him playfully. “Of course I know that. I’m your best friend. But I’m just saying...”

“That you think I’ve had it easy.”

God, not that kicked puppy look again. “Vaughn, I know life is never easy. It’s not that. But being different—in a town like this—it’s hard. And I’m worried about Calvin.”

“Okay,” he says softly. “But did you have to kiss him?”

I laugh at the grossed-out face he’s wearing and punch him in the shoulder again. “He kissed me, asshole.”

“Did you like it?”

I park in front of Calvin’s house and turn the truck off, slowly looking at my best friend. “Do you actually want to know the answer to that?” Because he can’t want to know if the kiss was good.

“Yes,” he says emphatically.

I sigh and look out the windshield because I can’t look at him. “It felt right.”

I can hear his shock. “What?”

I turn to look at him and see he looks horrified. “Remember when Misty kissed me in seventh grade?” He nods his head slowly. “It was nice—but off.”

“You said you liked it.”

“What was I going to say, Vaughn? That I was a thirteen-year-old guy who didn’t feel a thing when a really pretty girl kissed him?”

“If it was the truth, yeah.”

I sigh again and look out the window, past him. “It’s not that simple.”

“But it felt right with Calvin ?” He says his name with disgust.

“Not right like I want him or like I love him. Right like...” I swallow hard and look into his eyes. “Like that thing that was missing with Misty wasn’t missing with him. Like I wasn’t so broken. Because it felt good, until he shoved me and told me he’d kick my ass if I ever told anyone.”

His eyes flash with anger, and I put a hand on his arm to try to calm him. “That fucker.”

I laugh and shake my head. “He’s scared, Vaughn. It’s fear. And it’s not misguided. Fear is a real thing in this situation.”

“Are you scared?”

He looks terrified for me, and it’s devastating. “Not really. I have you,” I say with a smile. “And your fierce as fuck girlfriend.”

That earns a cocky grin. “Yeah, she is pretty great.” And there’s that uncomfortable twist in my stomach, but I try to push it away.

“But Calvin doesn’t have that.” I look at the modest white house on First Street. “I’m not sure he has anyone who’ll have his back.”

His expression is still grim, but he nods and then pulls on the handle to open the door. “Let’s go check on him then.”

I follow, and we walk up to the front door. I see Calvin’s truck is here but no other cars. That’s probably good. I ring the doorbell and wait. It doesn’t take too long before there are heavy footsteps, and then the door tears open. Calvin stands there, darkness under his eyes, and he looks like absolute shit.

Honestly, Calvin is a decent-looking guy—far better-looking than his older brother—but his attitude makes him ugly. “Why the fuck are you here?”

“Watch it. He’s here as a friend,” Vaughn says.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” I say carefully, my eyes roaming over him and telling me he’s so not okay.

“I’m fine. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Calvin—” He starts to shut the door in my face, but I stop it with my hand. “I know this sucks.”

“You don’t know shit. No one knows anything.”

“They don’t, and it’s none of their business.” His jaw ticks, and he stands there, beet red and angry. “I’m sorry that happened. It wasn’t right, and it sucks that everyone is talking about it. But it will pass.”

“Yeah, Mrs. Johnson has a brand-new baby lamb, and people were pretty excited about that today,” Vaughn says, and I can’t help but smile at my best friend.

Calvin—not so much. “I don’t need you two assholes trying to make me feel better.

I'm fine. You need to leave."

He looks around nervously, and I look behind me, seeing that no one is around. "Where are your parents?"

His eyes narrow on mine. "It's Wednesday. Mom's at church. Dad's at the bar."

I nod. Pretty typical around here. "If you ever want to talk..."

"I don't," he says, and I step back so he can slam the door in our faces.

"Dickhead," Vaughn says, and then we both walk down the steps and back to my truck.

"We don't know what his home life is like, Vaughn, but I can guess."

"Yeah. Maybe," he says as he hops into the truck. "Let's go to my place. I have some chemistry homework I really need some help with or Mrs. Anders is going to flunk my ass."

I snort and start up my truck, pulling out of the driveway. "Don't worry. I'll save you."

He's beaming at me now, and I have to look away.

One secret down.

One more to go.

VAUGHN

I can't decide why it bothers me so much that Austin wanted to check on Calvin. I mean, it makes sense. Austin is a good person, always has been. Some people think he's judging them or snarky, but when it counts, he cares.

Still, I don't understand why he's giving Calvin the time of day, unless he really does like him. Hearing him say that Calvin threatened him after kissing him, though, pisses me off to no end. It makes me want to slam my fist in his stupid face—and I'm not really that violent of a person.

Though I do enjoy the hell out of football. I don't actually try to hurt anyone. But he hurt my best friend. That's just unacceptable to me.

When we get to my place, we're greeted by my mom. Dad picked up an extra shift, and my sister is still with her friends. We head to my room, but I can't stop thinking about Calvin.

And Austin.

Calvin kissing Austin. It just doesn't sit right with me, and not because they're both guys. I swear that doesn't bother me. I just want Austin happy, and how the hell can he be happy with Calvin?

"Something tells me you aren't thinking about homework," Austin says, closing his

textbook and eyeing me with suspicion and knowing.

“I just don’t want you dating Calvin,” I blurt out, and his eyes go wide.

He huffs, covering his face with his hands and falling back on my bed. “Jesus Christ, Vaughn. I told you I don’t like him like that.”

“But you said it was right when you kissed.” I scrunch up my nose because I just don’t get it. I guess Calvin is a decent-looking guy, objectively, but Austin is beautiful. Inside and out. He can do so much better.

He drops his hands from his face and stares at me from flat on his back. “I don’t know how to explain it to you. I guess...” He sits up and crosses his legs, so he’s facing me head-on. “I’m guessing you’ve never been kissed by a guy.”

I shake my head. It’s not something I’ve ever even considered. Besides, I wound up with Vanessa pretty early. But could I have kissed a guy if I hadn’t started dating Vanessa? I think about it for a moment. I like kissing Vanessa. She smells good, and she’s soft and warm. Her lips are soft.

Would a guy’s lips be that soft? What about their hands? They’d probably be all rough and big. I frown, not sure I’d like that.

“Okay, stop.” Austin laughs. “No guys for you.”

I shrug. “I don’t think it would bother me to kiss a guy. I just don’t think it would do anything for me.”

“Exactly,” he says, looking me dead in the eyes, like he’s waiting for me to get it.

I think about it slowly, and Austin just lets me process it, waiting patiently like he

does. “So when you kissed Misty, it was okay, didn’t bother you, but it wasn’t something you wanted to do all the time?”

“Right. Girls don’t repulse me or anything. I just don’t want to kiss them.”

“That makes sense.” I like that Austin explains things to me like this. I could never ask one of my other friends something like that. They’d give me so much shit. But Austin never does that. Not with anything. He just explains it to me in a way I can understand.

“Okay, so now let’s get some homework done because I plan on sleeping in my own bed tonight.”

That makes me frown. “What? Why?”

He laughs and hands me a textbook. “Because we don’t always have to sleep in the same bed.” He shoves me when my frown becomes even bigger. “Vaughn, come on. I’m not always going to be able to sleep over in college.”

“Yeah, I know, which means we should now while we can. I don’t sleep as well without you.”

Instead of being weirded out or teasing me, he just grips my shoulder, comforting me, “You’re going to be fine.”

“See, if you’d get your own place, I could sneak out every night in college.”

He snorts, but I don’t miss a quick look pass over his face—this odd look he gets every so often these days when I bring up college.

“Is that why you want to go to college? To hook up?”

“What?” He looks a little offended, but he still smiles when he shakes his head at me like I’m ridiculous. “No. I’m going to college for an education.”

“But you still want to date, right?”

He gives me a serious look, and I’m not sure why my stomach twists up in knots, thinking about it. I mean, he should date. Austin is amazing. He deserves to be happy. But what if he starts dating an asshole worse than Calvin?

“Because you have to be careful with that. It’s a bigger city. It’s different from here, and what if you wind up with a prick?”

He gives me that deep heavy sigh I’m getting really used to. “I won’t. I’m smart. Don’t worry.”

“I know you’re smart—like, book smart, but people—that’s different. You might trust the wrong guy. What if I’m not there to help?”

He pats my knee with his hand. “Vaughn, it’s not your job to protect me, and I know you think it is, but I’m a grown man. I can take care of myself. And yeah, it would be great to meet a guy to get naked with, but that’s not why I’m going to college.”

Naked with? What the hell?

He laughs and shoves me, nearly knocking me back on the bed because I wasn’t ready for that. “What’s happening to your face?”

“Naked? You want to have sex with these guys?”

He laughs again as I right myself, sitting back up. “Are you really scandalized by that? I’ve had to watch you and Van dry hump in the hallway so many times, I’m

surprised I haven't gone blind."

"Shut up." I shove him back, and he cackles. "That's not true. We don't do that."

"You do. It's disgusting."

I laugh and roll my eyes. "We do not."

"Come on. Enough distractions. We need to study."

"Right. So you can get away from me," I snark, and I just get a roll of his eyes in return.

"Not true."

"One more question," I say as I crack open my book.

"What?"

"Are you coming to prom with Vanessa and me? It's two weeks away."

He's already shaking his head, and I'm not happy. I knew he'd fight me on it. "What? No. That's a date for Vanessa and you. It's senior prom."

"So?" I shrug, so not getting it. "Vanessa wants you to come with us. It's better than you going alone."

"Yeah, I'm not going at all."

I stare at him, shocked. He went last year, begrudgingly, but he still went. "What? Why the hell not?"

“Because I don’t need to, Vaughn. I’m ready for school to be over. I want to graduate and get the hell out of here. I’m just counting down the days.” He places a solid hand on my shoulder. “You need to go with Vanessa and have a blast. Please don’t think about me when you’re there.”

Yeah, right. I decided not to fight him anymore on it, though I’m disappointed. We do our homework, eat dinner, and then he pries himself away from me and drives home to his own house and his own bed.

I toss and turn as I try to go to sleep. Don’t think about him when I’m at prom and he’s at home, not at prom?

Is he insane?

Of course I’ll be thinking about him and how he’s supposed to be where I am. Always.

10

AUSTIN

Senior prom. I smile to myself as I think about Vaughn's pouty face when he tried one more time last night to get me to go with Vanessa and him. To. Prom.

It was funny and cute, honestly. But it also just cemented my decision to not go to the same college. Because I need a break from this. Not from him, never from him. But watching him with someone else. Someone who's really great and perfect for him. Someone he loves in a way he'll never be able to love me.

I can't do it anymore. I watched as my mom took a picture of Vanessa and Vaughn. Vanessa in a beautiful red dress and him in his tux, her head on his shoulder. And then of course, Vaughn had to drag me right in between them for another picture.

It's early in the morning, and the sun is just starting to crack through my window, but I'm not in any hurry to get out of bed today. Nowhere to go or to be. But I do sit up when I hear a weird noise outside my window and nearly have a heart attack when I see my best friend's face appear before he taps on the glass.

He's wearing a t-shirt and sweats. His hair is all mussed, and I'm not sure he even went to bed last night, but the bastard still looks mouthwatering as I walk over in my boxer briefs to open my window. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be passed out in a tent on your property?"

Vaughn's parents don't mind him having friends over in the pasture to party

occasionally, and I know that's where a lot of our class was headed last night after prom.

He climbs in through my window fairly gracefully but nearly bites it on the landing. Still when he stands upright, he's all smiles. "Nope. Since you wouldn't go out with us last night, I'm here. Right where I'm supposed to be."

Doesn't he know he's killing me when he says stuff like that? I watch shamelessly as he strips out of his shirt and sweats, his briefs clinging onto his delectable ass as he makes his way to my bed. He peels back the covers and climbs in.

"Come on."

Damn him. I can't say no. I walk toward the bed, trying to think about the periodic table in my mind so I don't get hard, but it's impossible when he pulls me into his cool skin.

"Warm." He snuggles into me.

"I'm sure Vanessa was warm this morning. Please tell me you didn't ditch her in the tent?"

He snorts, his face buried in my neck. "Of course not. I took her home and walked her inside like a total gentleman."

And then you came to cuddle practically naked with your best friend. But I don't say that out loud. I know what we have is special to Vaughn. It's special to me too, even though it's torture.

"How was it?"

“What, sex with Vanessa?” I nearly choke on my own spit as he pulls back enough to watch me, confusion written all over his face.

“No. Have I ever asked about that?”

He just shrugs and then pulls me back into him. “What then?”

“Prom,” I say, exasperated. I cannot with him sometimes.

“Oh.” He chuckles. “Fine. We danced, and we went to my place and drank, partied. I wanted you to be there.”

Again, my stupid heart kicks up when he says things like that. “I’m sorry. Prom just isn’t my thing.”

“You think if you had a boyfriend, it would be?”

He seems to be a little obsessed with me dating lately. Ever since he found out I was gay, it’s like his number one worry. Making sure that I don’t look on apps and that I really know someone before agreeing to be alone with them. He’s in full-on protective mode, that’s for sure. It would be endearing if it wasn’t driving me so insane.

“I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter because I don’t have a boyfriend, and high school is over in two weeks.” And I cannot wait. But I’ve seen the hurt look on Vaughn’s face when I’ve said that out loud, so I refrain.

“Graduation night, you have to come over. We’ll sleep in the same tent. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

I huff and fall onto my back from my side, but his big body follows mine.

“Promise.”

“Vaughn...” I start to argue, but he lifts his head, and I look at those pouty lips and sad, determined eyes.

“Promise me. Just you and me on graduation night. I think Christie Shaw is having a party at her place. So it won’t be loud and annoying.”

God, that’s even worse somehow. It’ll be just Vaughn and me alone.

“I don’t know... Shouldn’t you spend that night with Vanessa?”

“She’s sleeping over at Katie’s house, since Katie is going to New York for school. She’s going to miss her.”

I nod, swallowing hard because I do want to get every second I can with Vaughn this summer. It’s selfish and wrong because I’m still hiding this big secret—and part of me is afraid he’ll never talk to me again.

I need to have this last summer with my best friend.

“Okay,” I agree.

But there’s a sense of dread in my belly because I know what I have to do that night...

I have to finally tell my best friend the entire truth.

VAUGHN

“V aughn Montgomery.” I walk toward the principal while the crowd around us cheers, my heart totally full as I accept the piece of paper, which apparently, isn’t my actual diploma but is supposed to represent it.

I shake the principal’s hand and then look out at the crowd, fixing my eyes firmly on Austin, who’s clapping and cheering loudly, even though he’s next in line. I wink at him and then head off the stage to clap like crazy when the principal calls out, “Austin Pierce.”

We’re high-school graduates.

We all toss our cardboard hats in the air. My arms wrap around Austin in a tight hug as we all cheer loudly. On to the next step. Vanessa finds me and lays a kiss on my lips, and then we all head out to our own graduation parties.

I’ll see Vanessa tomorrow, so I’m sure to give her another kiss. But Austin and I rode here together, so he drives us to my house, where our parents decided to throw us a joint graduation party—because why fight that?

I have a feeling my mom knew I’d totally ditch my own party to go to Austin’s and probably vice versa, though Austin plays it cooler than I do. After the party is over though, I grab the tent from the garage and put it in the back of my truck.

Mom packed up a lot of food from the party and hands it to me in a cooler. “You boys have fun.”

“We will,” we singsong on our way out to the truck.

When we get out to our spot, near the pond at the back of the property that’s surrounded by trees, we make quick work of putting up the tent. We’ve done this so many times, I think we could both do it blindfolded by now.

We set up a nice fire with two camping chairs side by side just as the sun starts to set behind the trees. “Man, I’m going to miss this,” I say as I look at the orange and pinks of the sky.

“Me too.”

I turn my head to look at him because he sounds a little sad. “You okay? I thought you’d be overjoyed today, but you’ve been pretty quiet.”

“I’m always quiet. You’re loud enough for the both of us,” he teases, and I grin, looking back at the sunset.

“True, but why aren’t you happier?”

“Because I have to tell you something.”

My blood runs cold, something in his tone says this isn’t a good thing he has to tell me. I turn to look at him slowly, noticing the crease between his brows. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s not bad. At least, not really. You’re going to think it is at first, but you have to trust me...”

“Spit it out,” I say, my panic rising as he just babbles on. Which is so not like Austin to do.

His eyes are full of worry as he licks his lips and then lets out a heavy, worry-filled breath. “I’m not going to State.”

My brow furrows, and what the hell is he talking about? “What do you mean? You have to go to college. You’re the smartest person I know.”

“I am going to college.” I cock my head to the side, trying to figure out what’s going on. “Just not State. I’m going to KU instead.”

“What?” I feel frozen, totally unable to think or move. My brain doesn’t seem to be catching up to what he’s saying because... he can’t be saying that.

“When did you decide that?”

“I was accepted to both, and I wasn’t totally sure until a couple of months ago.”

“Both?” I ask, totally dumbfounded. He didn’t tell me. He was keeping more secrets from me?

“I’m sorry, Vaughn . . .”

I stand up from the chair, my heart in my throat because I don’t understand how he could lie to me so much. I thought we told each other everything. Hiding his sexuality from me, I’m trying to understand, but this? This makes no sense to me.

“Why?” I spin around to face him, seeing he’s standing right behind me.

“Because I need to do this on my own. It’s not that far away. Two-hour drive.”

He says that like it's nothing. "Four hours from home."

He looks stricken with guilt now, and I hate it. Hate that he won't just talk to me. "This doesn't really feel like home to me."

"What?" I feel like that's all I'm able to say. "How can you say that?"

"Because it's true, and I know I owe you the truth."

"Yeah, for once." I don't feel great about saying that, but it's true. He's been lying to me for months.

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that," I command, and he plops back down in his chair, pushing his fingers through his hair, looking far too defeated for my liking. I sit down next to him again. "Why can't you go to the same college as me?"

"Because we do everything together."

"And that's a bad thing?"

I watch him take his time with his answer. Being careful. I hate that. "It can be." I wince, and his eyes meet mine. "I need to do this alone."

"Why? So you can date? You can date with me around. I'll be totally cool. I swear."

He snorts a quick laugh at that, but he's not laughing at me. At least I don't feel like he is. "It's not that. I just... I need some space."

"From me?" It feels like he's sliced my heart in half, and it makes it hard to breathe.

I'm so damn confused. "Where did this all come from?"

"It's been there for a while." He won't look at me now, instead looking out over the sky.

"Austin, look at me." He does but so very slowly. "Did I do something?"

"No," he answers instantly, but it doesn't make me feel any better. "You didn't. Of course you didn't. You've been the best friend a guy could ask for. You've been amazing."

"But yet, you still want to get away from me."

"No. It's not about that, Vaughn."

"You said you need space from me." I try not to sound hurt, but I know I failed.

"I need space from everything. I need to go to college and have my own experience. Figure out exactly who I am, away from here. That's what college is about. At least it is to me."

"You're Austin." I say it like it's the most simple answer, and to me, it is. He's my best friend. Who loves to read and hates sports. Who secretly loves horror movies, even though he tells everyone they're stupid. His favorite color is dark green, and I think it's because it makes his eyes pop. He loves to swim, and when we were younger, I used to have to bribe him to do anything else in the summer.

"I am, but I need to figure out who I am when I'm not here, and who I am without..."

"Me," I answer for him because I could feel it coming.

He nods his head slowly, and I feel like I'm going to puke. I fold my arms over my stomach and hope I don't actually hurl. "It's not going to change anything. We'll always be friends. It's two hours away, Vaughn. I'll come see you, and you can come see me."

"Everything will change." I'm not the smartest guy, but I know that much.

"It won't. I promise you." He looks so serious, like he believes that.

"Are you sure you have to do this?"

His eyes search my face and roam over my eyes before he slowly nods his head. "I have to. I didn't know how to tell you, but it doesn't mean I wanted to keep it from you. I just didn't want to hurt you."

"Okay," I say, my throat actually aching. "If this is what you need, then I understand."

"Thank you," he says softly and then pulls me into a hug. I hold onto him probably a hell of a lot tighter than is comfortable for him.

But the lie burns my insides.

Because I'm anything but okay right now, and I don't understand a damn thing.

12

AUSTIN

The summer flew by way too fast. And Vaughn and I made every second of it count. I'm not really sure who was more needy this summer, him or me. It doesn't really matter.

We both know that tomorrow, we're leaving for college—going to two separate towns—and it's probably going to be awhile before we see each other. Telling him I'm not going to the same college as him was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. The look of hurt in his eyes—it haunts me.

Especially because I didn't tell him the whole truth. He just thinks I'm going to try to discover myself—which is true. But I also just can't stand being this close to him and not having him.

I can't tell him that though. I can't risk him hating me. This summer has pretty much confirmed that for me. Getting to spend all this free time with my best friend. Going swimming in the lake and camping out a ton. Hanging with Vanessa, and even Katie has become a pretty good friend over the summer.

I think we've all been wrapped up in the nostalgia. Knowing we're heading on to our next chapter.

We set up a tent in our spot and get a fire going with our chairs close enough to it to roast marshmallows, but not so close the smoke makes us sick. It's a weird feeling,

sitting here in a place so familiar—knowing it will be a while before I’m back here. It’s strange because part of me is excited about that fact—doesn’t want to be here again for a while. But the other part of me is mourning a loss. Knowing what I’m losing.

I look over at my best friend—he’s happy like always—but there’s a sense of sadness there. He’s lost in thought, and I’m okay with sitting here silently for a little while too, lost in my own. I’m ready to get out of my parents’ house, even though I love them. I’m excited to get out of this town and be around people who don’t know everything about me. Who I didn’t go to school with.

I want to learn what the world is like outside this town. I want to go to bookstores and get coffee. I want to walk around campus and explore all kinds of different classes until I choose a major.

But when I look at Vaughn, I can’t help but worry about him. He likes the small-town life. He loves being surrounded by people who have known him since birth. He’s used to being popular and having people fawn all over him—I have no doubt he’ll find that in college—but he has to be open to it.

And the way he’s looking out at the horizon right now, I think it’s going to be a hard-fought battle. A war with himself.

“What are you thinking about?” I have to ask—I have to know.

He turns to look at me, the worry written on his face. “Do you really have to do this? Go to a different school? Leave me behind?”

The hurt on his face is killing me. I know he isn’t trying to make me feel guilty. It’s just—Vaughn wears his feelings right there on his face. He knows he can’t lie to me, and I’m not sure he would even if he could. “I’m not leaving you behind. You’re

going too.”

“But not to the same school,” he points out. “You purposely chose a different school than me. Knowing I’m locked into State.”

He’s not wrong, and I know it hurts. I didn’t do it to hurt him, but it doesn’t mean it doesn’t. “I’m sorry I hurt you.” It feels like all I can really say. The only reason I’m sorry about the choice I made is because it makes him sad. I know in my gut it’s the right move for me. And maybe even for him in the long run. We may be just a bit too codependent. He needs to see he’ll be okay without me.

“I just want to make sure you’re totally sure. It’s not too late. You could change your mind.”

He’s killing me here. I can see the look on his face, him flat-out begging me to go to the same college, and honestly, it’s hard for me not to agree. Just to see that infectious smile again and tell him I’ll go to school with him, but I know I need to stay strong. It will hurt now, but in the long run, it’ll be so much better. “I can’t,” I say softly.

He stands up abruptly, walking away from me but spinning around to look over at me. “Because you want to date, right? And you think I’ll get in the way of that.”

Partially, yes, but it’s so much bigger than that. It takes everything in me not to blurt that out and to only slowly stand up instead of rushing over to him. “I want to date, sure.”

“You can date someone at State. It doesn’t have to be at KU.”

The two colleges are the biggest in the state, but they’re different. State is more agriculture. More like home. Conservative. KU, it’s different. “I think I may be more

likely to find my type at KU.” I don’t want to make this all about dating because it isn’t. “I think the college just fits me better, Vaughn. I don’t want to become a veterinarian. I don’t want to study grain science.”

“You know there’s more than that there.” I do, but he doesn’t let me get in any more words. “And your type ? What’s your type? Like dating-wise... you can tell me.”

My heart squeezes so hard in my chest, I think I might pass out as I walk closer to him, only a foot apart. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Tell me what you’re looking for.”

I smile at him sarcastically when I ask, “Why? Are you going to play matchmaker?”

“Maybe,” he says, finally smiling a little bit.

I throw my hands up and pace a little right in front of him. “I don’t know, Vaughn. Someone who hates sports and loves books.” He frowns now, and I continue, “Who maybe couldn’t bench press me.” A wrinkle forms between his brows. “Who loves coffee and doesn’t think it’s disgusting or taste like burn . I try to smile at him, knowing that last part was completely and totally on the nose, since he’s said it more times than I can count.

“You mean the total opposite of me.”

Yes. I close my eyes briefly and then stop moving as I meet his eyes. “I just need something different. I need new experiences. And so do you.”

He doesn’t look convinced at all, but he finally nods and then looks back over at the tent. “We should go to bed. Vanessa is going to be here early in the morning.” He seems resigned to the fact that I’m going to leave tomorrow, and I should feel

relieved, but all I feel is dread.

Knowing tomorrow changes everything.

We put the fire out and then strip out of our jeans and shirts, climbing into the tent and into our own sleeping bags, lying side by side, facing each other. I can barely make him out in the dark night, but the moon is large enough tonight that I can make out his outline.

“You know, when you were describing your perfect guy, you were kind of describing yourself.”

I chuckle. “I mean, can you blame me? I’m a catch,” I try to joke, but he doesn’t laugh. His big hand reaches up and his fingers stroke over my cheek.

“You are. Don’t you ever forget it.”

I swallow hard, fighting back tears because I don’t want to be without him either. Even if I know it’s for the best, it’s gutting me just as badly as it is him, maybe even more.

“So are you.” I smile and reach up, moving my hand over his and giving it a squeeze. “Now quit your yapping so I can get some sleep.”

I can see his face moving into a smile, and we settle in, my head against his arm as he drifts off to sleep, but I don’t fall into a peaceful sleep.

I’m not ready for tomorrow to come.

Of course it does though. I see the sun coming up and wonder if I managed to get a full hour of sleep last night or not. My body is sore and aching from sleeping on the

hard ground, but as I study my best friend's beautiful face, there's no part of me that regrets spending last night that way.

I slowly make my way out of the tent, grabbing my t-shirt and pulling it on because it's chilly this morning without the sun being fully up. I find a spot to piss and then grab my toothbrush and quickly brush my teeth using a bottle of water to rinse, and when I get back, Vaughn is just now sitting up.

He looks rumpled by sleep, his hair sticking up all over the place and creases on his perfect face. He's gorgeous. He's not covered by the sleeping bag anymore, and I can see his perfect chest and abs, just right there for my viewing pleasure and so damn unfair because it's look but don't touch.

"Morning." I have to look away before my dick tries to join in on our morning.

"Vanessa text yet?"

"Yeah, she's leaving soon."

I nod, which gives us about fifteen minutes. "We should pack up."

He agrees, and we both finish getting dressed and pack up the tent and supplies. Neither of us saying a word because what else is there to say? We've said it all. We're sitting on the tailgate of my truck after, just waiting for Vanessa to show up, when I guess he decides to say one last thing. "Are you totally sure?"

I close my eyes on a laugh as I shake my head at his persistence. "You just don't give up, do you?"

"Not when it comes to you. We can figure this out. You can come to school with me, and it'll all be okay." I can't take this anymore. "I'll help you find some adorable hipster who can barely lift his laptop while balancing coffee and a book in his hand.

I'll?—”

“Stop,” I say abruptly because he’s killing me. I stand up, unshed tears in my eyes, and look directly at him. “I can’t.”

“You can.” He stands there with me looming over him, but he’s not intimidated in the least. He doesn’t back down. “You just don’t want to.”

“Maybe I don’t,” I say, and he winces then, but I can’t keep doing this. It isn’t fair to either of us. “I don’t want to go to State. Okay? I said it. It’s out there now. Can we please just drop it?”

“No.” He stands up, getting into my space, his big body making me feel small, but I’m not scared of Vaughn—at least not physically. “We can’t just drop it. Tell me why. I know you’re keeping something else from me. I can feel it. I may be dumb, but I’m not that dumb.”

“You’re not fucking dumb at all,” I grit out, hating that he thinks of himself that way. “Please just drop it,” I say, the words actually painful.

“No.” He steps even closer to me, his hands going to my shoulders and holding on so I can’t escape. “Tell me.”

“You really want to know?” I look up into his soulful eyes, wearing every emotion he’s feeling. “You think it will make anything better? Because it won’t. It’ll make it worse.”

“No. It won’t. The truth is never wrong. Tell me, Austin. Tell me why you’re trying like hell to get away from me.”

“Because I’m in love with you!” I shout and then pull away from him, watching his

body morph into frozen fear and shock because, of course, he's surprised. He had no idea that's how I felt about him, and I know I just made everything so much worse. Just like I said.

"Vaughn..." I place a careful hand on his shoulder, but he won't look at me.

"You're in love with me?" He says it with quiet wonder, looking down at the ground. "That's why you don't want to be near me?"

"It's not that I don't want to be around you at all. I'm not cutting you out of my life. I just need some..."—I try to be careful with my words because I've done enough damage—"distance."

He slowly turns his head, and his eyes are watery as they meet mine. It's a punch to the gut. I did that to him. I broke one of the happiest guys I know. I hurt him. "Distance."

He says it quietly, and I feel a tear of my own slide down my cheek. "Just for a while. Maybe I'll meet someone great, and I'll decide this wasn't actually love. Maybe my brain is just confusing the nicest, best guy I know and being in love."

"And totally the hottest guy you know, right?" he says, a tiny little smile on his face.

I grin at that, another tear falling as I try to choke back a sob. "Yeah, and not at all modest."

He smiles, and I watch his Adam's apple bob with sorrow. "I'm so sorry, Austin. I didn't know."

"How could you know? I didn't tell you, and I hid it as much as I could."

“But...” he starts but is interrupted by the sound of tires on gravel, and we both turn to see Vanessa’s car coming down the path to the campsite.

I pull him into a hug. “Your ride’s here.”

He squeezes me back so tightly, I can barely breathe, but I don’t care at all. “Promise me, you won’t try to ditch me. That you’ll answer when I call, and we’ll see each other.” He pulls back but just enough to look into my eyes. “Promise me, or I won’t let you go.”

I smile, the emotions clogging my throat, and part of me wants to make him promise not to let me go either, but instead, I nod my head. “I promise. Go and be great, Montgomery.”

I wink at him, and he hugs me one last time before shoving me playfully away with a laugh. “That’s Vaughn to you.”

I smile. “Go be great, Vaughn.”

He looks like he’s going to cry, and I, for sure, know I will be as soon as he and Vanessa leave. But we manage to hang on until I give Vanessa and him a final hug, and then they drive off.

I know this is for the best.

I know this is right.

But goddamn, if it doesn’t still feel completely wrong too.

VAUGHN

“Hey you.” Vanessa wraps her arms around my neck and gives me a kiss before we start our walk from where we met after class. Hers was in the building next to mine. It’s so good to see her face because I’m in a shitty mood.

We’ve been in college for a little over two weeks, and it’s been miserable. I mean, classes are fine. I like my new teammates—the ones I’ve talked to anyway—it’s a really big team, and I’m not a starting player yet.

So far, the classes haven’t been anything I can’t handle. But there’s one thing looming over my head nonstop—Austin.

I’ve talked to him, here and there, since we went our separate ways at the end of summer, but we mostly just keep it casual. Talk about classes and college, but not about his confession the last time I saw him—that he’s in love with me.

Austin, my best friend in the entire world—is in love with me. Like actual love. Although, it did sound like maybe he wasn’t totally sure, like maybe he thinks I’m all he knows and maybe if he goes to college away from me, he’ll find someone he actually loves.

I rub at the spot on my chest, right over my heart to try to ease the ache there. I don’t know how I feel about that. I mean... it’s not like I don’t love him, but I’m not sure I could ever...

Yeah. No. I'm straight.

I think.

I don't know what's going on with me. All I know is I can't think about anything but Austin and him being in love with me. The raw, wrenching pain I saw on his face when he told me is what I see and hear before I go to bed at night and the very first thing I think about when I wake up.

"How was your day?" Vanessa is talking to me, I realize, as we make it to my dorm, and I swipe my student ID to go inside.

"Fine." We reach the elevator and go up to the sixth floor.

She laughs as I check my phone for what feels like the hundredth time today. "Fine? Why don't I believe you?"

We go into my dorm room—which I'm lucky is actually a single. All the athlete dorms are. So I have the room to myself, a twin bed, and even a spot for a desk. It's a hell of a lot nicer than Vanessa's, where she wound up with a roommate who hasn't said more than two words to me since we've been here.

"I'm just tired, I guess." I know it's a lie, but for some reason, I haven't told Van about what Austin said. I don't think it's my place—even though I know she wouldn't be mad about it. It's not like I'm going to act on it—or him, for that matter. She'd probably think it's funny and tease us relentlessly.

I flop down on my bed, and she straddles my lap, her hands going to my shoulders. "Poor baby."

I stare at my phone as she tries to massage the tension from my shoulders.

She laughs. “Why do I think this is more than just being tired?”

I look at my phone again and then shrug, meeting her eyes. “I sent him a text before class, but he hasn’t responded.”

She laughs again, one of her fingers tracing over my collarbone, dipping my shirt collar down to touch bare skin. “Aw, I’m sorry, baby. Maybe I can distract you.” She leans in, going for my neck, but just then my phone vibrates in my hand.

I startle and accidentally dump her on the floor with a thump. “Oh shit. Sorry.” I reach for her as I hit the accept button, seeing my best friend’s face on my screen. “Austin, hey.”

He looks amused as he watches Vanessa climb up off the floor and next to me. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Nope. Just your dumbass best friend dropping me on my ass,” Vanessa says with a teasing glare at me.

“Sorry.” I cringe.

“Suuuure,” she teases and looks at the screen. “You look good, Austin.”

He really does. I think he actually has a tan, which—he’s not super pale, but I didn’t expect him to be tan. I thought he’d shove himself into a library and never go outside.

He laughs. “Thanks. Sorry about your butt.”

Vanessa cackles, light and free and totally happy. “Eh, it’ll be fine. It’s a good butt.”

Austin just grins, shaking his head. “You okay?” I know he’s talking to me now, and

I wonder if I can get by with lying to him. Because I'm definitely not okay. Not even a little bit. I miss him like crazy, and I don't know how I'm going to make it the rest of the year like this. "I'm fine. Just hadn't heard from you."

I can't really figure out what his face is doing right now—not exactly a frown, but he doesn't look happy either. He's walking outside, and as he passes people, they seem to know him by name as they say hi. "I'm sorry. I was in class." He doesn't sound defensive or irritated, so that's a relief. Not that he owes me an explanation. "I'm heading to the library."

I smile. "Of course you are."

There's that smile I swear he used to only reserve for me, but I don't know. He passes another person he seems to know and shoots them the same smile and a happy wave. "Can I call you later?"

Right. Because he's busy making new friends—smart friends, probably—who want to go to the library. Yay. Fun times. I try not to be a jealous prick, though, and put on a smile of my own—though I doubt it looks nearly as real. "Yeah, sure. I'll talk to you later."

"K. Bye, Van."

She waves. "Have fun being all smart and shit!"

He chuckles, his eyes locking on mine. "Talk to you later."

"Yeah, okay," I say, but I don't want him to go. I know I'm being a clingy, needy asshole, but I can't help it. His college friends get him all the time, and he can't spare a few minutes for me?

I hang up the phone and place it on the bed next to me, letting out a long huff. I know I'm not being fair, but I can't seem to help it. I lie back on the bed, and Vanessa climbs over next to me, tucking herself to my side.

It feels good, of course. I like having her here, but I can't stop thinking about Austin. Missing him.

"Oh my God. This is just sad," she says, a teasing lilt to her tone, and I know I'm a lucky guy because no other girl would put up with a boyfriend this obsessed with his best friend like she does. "You should go see him."

I turn my head to look at her. "Like now?"

She laughs, her hand resting over my heart and shakes her head. "No. Not now. It's Wednesday, and you have practice and class, and he has class and studying. But this weekend."

"Yeah?" For the first time since I got to college, I actually feel excited about something, and I sit up. "Yeah. I could go Friday after class. My last one gets out at three."

She laughs, and I'm pretty sure she's resisting rolling her eyes at me. "Are you going to tell him this plan?"

"Hell no. I'm going to surprise him."

She rolls to her side and props her head up on her hand. "Are you sure that's a good idea? What if he has company?"

I frown. Company? "What kind of..." Oh. "What? Like he's with a guy or something? Hooking up?"

She laughs and rolls to her back. “That’s what some people do in college, you know.” Her not-so-subtle jab is probably at me and my lack of libido, but I’ve been busy and sad, okay? Totally normal.

“He’s not like that.”

She gives me a skeptical look but doesn’t argue with me, for which I’m glad. I can’t really explain the uncomfortable feeling twisting my stomach, thinking about walking in on him with some guy.

But the excitement about seeing him doesn’t fade at all.

I can’t wait to go visit my best friend.

Maybe he can show me what makes college so great and what’s brought such a smile to his face.

14

AUSTIN

What a week. I'm exhausted, but it's a good kind of exhausted. One that feels productive and like I actually learned a lot. In high school, I honestly felt bored most of the time. It probably makes me sound like an asshole, but there was no real challenge there.

The classes I'm taking here—they challenge me. They force me to really think, and I'm loving every second of it. Okay, almost every second of it because my mind always goes back to Vaughn.

He looked so sad on our video call on Wednesday. So lost. That's not at all what I want for my best friend. I need him to be thriving too. Hopefully, he'll get there and really soon. He did seem to be in a much better mood when I talked to him that night.

"You heading to the dining hall?" I look over at my roommate, Evan, and nod as he grabs his duffle bag from his closet and starts to pack.

"Yeah, I think so. You?"

"Nah. I'll just grab dinner at home."

I grin, but then there's a knock on our door that gets my attention. "Expecting someone?"

He shakes his head. “Nope. Already told Lisa goodbye.”

“Well maybe she wants one last kiss,” I tease, and he tosses a pair of his socks at me. I catch them and throw them back as I pull open the door, certain I’m right about it being his girlfriend—the two are disgustingly and adorably in loooooove.

But instead of Lisa standing at our dorm door, it’s Vaughn, looking kind of like an excited puppy, bouncing on his feet with a bag slung over his shoulder, his eyes bright and happy. “Hey.”

“Vaughn?” I can’t keep the bigass smile off my face. He’s here. “What are you doing here?”

“I um...” Now he looks adorably nervous, as if I’d be mad about him showing up here. I watch as he shifts from foot to foot, playing with the strap on his bag. “I thought we could hang out.”

“Cool,” I say, even though I’m kind of bursting inside. He looks good—but he always looks good. Tall and confident, with a hint of nerves. His hair styled perfectly, even though I doubt he did anything with it. “Come on in.”

I move out of the way, and his eyes lock instantly on Evan, who’s just now zipping up his bag, “Hey, man.”

Vaughn doesn’t return the greeting right away, his eyes still sizing up my roommate in that protective way I’m used to, but most aren’t. Evan raises his brow at me as if to say, what’s his deal? I want to tell him that’s just Vaughn, but with my best friend’s hackles already up, I don’t want to make it worse.

“Evan, this is my best friend, Vaughn. Vaughn, this is my roommate, Evan. You almost missed him. He’s going home for the weekend.”

“Home?” Vaughn questions, still watching Evan like a hawk.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, but Evan is a pretty confident guy and doesn’t have a problem walking toward Vaughn. “Yeah. My dads live about an hour from here, so I’m going home to do laundry and to get a home-cooked meal.”

“D-dads?” Vaughn asks, clearly a little shaken, and I hold my breath a little that he doesn’t put his foot in his mouth. Obviously, Vaughn doesn’t have an issue with that, but it’ll probably take his brain a second to catch up. We didn’t know anyone with two dads or two moms growing up.

“That a problem?” Evan asks defensively, and I’m about to jump in, but Vaughn raises his hands in surrender.

“No. Not at all. Why would it be?” He looks over at me, and I grin.

“Don’t worry, he’s not like the people I told you about.” Evan and I have had some pretty good talks already in the three weeks we’ve been rooming together. He knows about Big Bend and the shit I had to deal with coming out. He grew up in the city, but his dads still have to deal with the occasional asshole.

He knows I’m gay, and it was kind of a relief when I spit that out day one and he immediately told me that, and I quote, “Hey, so are my dads.” We’ve been pretty close since then.

“Good.” Evan still eyes him warily, but then swings his bag over his shoulder. “You two have fun.”

“You too. Still think you should take my laundry,” I tease.

He cackles and then reaches his hand out for Vaughn. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Vaughn doesn’t sound like he means it, but he does shake his hand, so I guess... progress.

Evan leaves and closes the door behind him before I look over at Vaughn as he observes the small dorm room. “You both live in here?”

I chuckle as I take a seat on my neatly made bed. “We do. He’s working on being a little bit less of a pig, but I can’t complain about much else.” I motion toward Evan’s side of the room, where his bed is left unmade and there are books and socks on the floor.

Vaughn puts his bag by the door and then runs over to my bed, bouncing down next to me and then wrapping his big arms around me. “I’ve missed you.”

I laugh, but I also relish his arms squeezing the life out of me and his warmth. God, he smells good even after two hours in the car. “I missed you too. You could have told me you were coming.”

“Why? Would you have told me not to?” He pulls back a little, his eyes looking uncertain and a little scared.

“No, dummy,” I say and playfully shove him. “But I’m glad I was here. I was just heading to the dining hall to get something to eat.”

“I would have waited for you.”

I laugh. “I have no doubt. You hungry?”

“Yeah.” He hugs me tighter. “Just a minute.” My stupid heart skips a beat as one of his hands goes to the back of my head, and he holds me there.

“Vaughn, you okay?”

“Yeah.” He pulls back. “Show me this place. I want to see all of it.”

I chuckle and stand up. “You staying the night?” He nods. “You won’t get in trouble? Don’t you have a game tomorrow?”

I watched the first game on television last week—yes, my best friend is on television every weekend during football season now. So weird. But I was definitely proud and pointed him out to my friends when they caught me watching a State football game. “Yeah, but not until the evening. It’s not like I play anyway.”

“Hey, you warmed that bench last week so well.” It’s not unusual for a freshman to sit out in college football, but I know, without a doubt, it’s driving him insane. Vaughn is a hands-on sort of guy.

He shoves me, and I nearly knock into the wall from the full force of his big body. He immediately feels bad and grabs for me, but I only laugh. Having missed his misjudgment of me being able to take a hit.

“Let’s go eat.”

I show him around campus, pointing out the buildings where I have class and of course, the library. He’s a good sport as he oohs and ahhs at each place before we go to the dining hall, and I grab him a guest pass.

We eat and then go for another walk back to the dorm just as the sun is setting. He doesn’t talk too much about college, so I try not to push. We get back to my dorm and hang out. He texts with Vanessa a little before I decide it’s time to go to bed.

I’m going to take him to the coffee shop on campus tomorrow and introduce him to a

couple of friends, hoping maybe that will put him at ease.

I strip down to my boxer briefs, and he does the same. “You can take Evan’s bed. I know for a fact he changed his sheets yesterday at my insistence.”

He wrinkles his nose, and I laugh. “Trust me. It has to be cleaner than your bed.”

“Hey, ever since you shamed me sophomore year for taking too long to wash my sheets, I’ve kept up with it.”

I give him a knowing look. “Even in college?”

He snorts, but he looks really sad as he walks over to Evan’s bed and pulls back the covers enough to climb into it. I know he probably wanted to share a bed, but I’m trying to have healthy boundaries here.

He gets settled under the covers, propping his head up on his folded hands on Evan’s pillow, his puppy dog eyes looking nearly distraught as I climb into my own bed and mirror his position.

“These beds are too small,” I say, trying like hell to remind myself why he can’t sleep in the same bed as me. My body has missed his way too much, and just him being across the room from me, nearly naked, is doing all sorts of things to my dick. It wants to say hello, and that’s just not going to work.

Vaughn is straight, dick . Why can’t it understand that?

“They aren’t too bad,” he says sadly, his eyes still zeroed in on me, hitting me right in the heart. “Mine is bigger though.”

I snort. “Jocks.”

He doesn't say anything, but I can't take it anymore. He looks so lonely and lost, even being in the same room.

I huff and scoot over toward the wall, lifting my blanket in invitation for him to join me. "Come here."

He doesn't hesitate, nearly tripping over the blanket that got wrapped around his feet and falling into bed with me. I laugh and pull the blanket over his bigass shoulder. He's hanging nearly off the edge of the bed but totally unbothered as he snuggles into me. His bare skin is warm, and I can smell the toothpaste on his breath.

I try like hell to will my body to not react to his closeness, but it's a lost cause—my dick is fully hard, and I can only hope he's oblivious.

"Are you okay?"

His head rests on my shoulder, and I feel him nod his head against it. "It's just all so weird, you know?"

"College?" I wrap my arm around him, trying to provide comfort while I keep my lower half as far away from him as I can.

"Yeah. I don't know anyone except Vanessa. Everywhere I go, it's just total strangers."

That's... odd for him. I always thought Vaughn never really met a stranger in his life. He always made friends so fast. Always the life of the party—maybe it's because in a way he kind of knew everyone in town—or knew of them. Or knew someone they were related to. I guess that would be a big adjustment for someone like Vaughn.

"And that's a bad thing?" I try to joke because it's no secret, I'm not a huge fan of

where we grew up.

“Yes.” He tickles my side, and I laugh, struggling to keep him from doing that anymore. “It’s weird. I go to something on campus, and it’s nothing like back home. No one knows me, and I don’t know anyone.”

“It takes time, Vaughn. You’ll make friends. What about the guys on the team?”

He shrugs. “They’re fine. Most of them can’t be bothered with freshmen though.”

“So make friends with the freshmen.”

“Yeah. I guess I can.” He sounds so resigned, and I hate it. I can’t help but feel like this is my fault, but then I feel his lips morph into a smile against my skin. “Tell me about you. It seems like you’ve made a lot of friends. I barely got a word in at dinner.”

I laugh. We ran into two people I knew and sat with them, but he’s being dramatic. I didn’t even know them that well, and we barely chatted. “I like it here,” I say, still feeling a little pang of guilt. “It’s a whole new world for me, and while you hate that no one knows you, I kind of love that.” I cringe, waiting for that hurt, but it doesn’t come.

He lifts his head, and he’s genuinely smiling at me. “That’s good. It’s great to see you so happy, Austin. I hated seeing you sad.”

“I know you did. I want you to be happy too though.” And it’s true. I think—I know—that if he doesn’t cheer up soon, I’m going to have to do something. I can’t stand the thought of sacrificing his happiness for my own.

“I will be.” He snuggles into me, holding me close, and I close my eyes, relaxing into

the moment. “So, any dates?”

I laugh. “You couldn’t resist, could you?”

“Nope,” he says, popping the p in an obnoxious way I, of course, find endearing.

“I actually have a date next Friday.”

I feel his entire body tense, and his eyes lift to look at me when I open mine.

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s nice. You’d like him, Vaughn.”

“Your type?” His jaw is tight, and I know he’s worried, but he doesn’t need to be. The guy is actually smaller than me—not that I think guys on the smaller side can’t be dangerous, but I feel safe with Justin.

“He’s great. Kind of on the nerdy side, which has me intrigued.”

Vaughn snorts. “He taking you to a museum?”

I laugh. “Close. Bookstore.”

“Gag.”

I laugh. “Shut up. I’m excited. First date and all that.”

I watch his throat bob, and his eyes cloud over with more worry and tension, but thankfully, he doesn’t ruin it for me. He just nods his head. “Call me after and tell me all about it.”

I smile. “Promise.”

And that’s it. There’s no more interrogation, and I’m relieved—but okay, maybe a little surprised he doesn’t have more questions.

Disappointed?

Not like I wanted him to grill me, but I thought there would be more to it.

But this is good. We’re finally getting to a healthier relationship.

This is good.

Good. Good. Good.

Maybe if I say it enough, I’ll believe it too.

15

VAUGHN

I 'm feeling a little better after my night with Austin. I mean, I felt sadder than I ever had when he was actually going to make me sleep in his roommate's bed, but when he offered to let me join him—all felt right in the world.

I'm man enough to admit I needed a good night of cuddling with my best friend. That's not weird or anything. And if it is, whatever, I'll own it.

I've had a bounce in my step all week, even though my team lost on Saturday, and Coach has been pushing us extra hard all week. Doesn't matter.

I haven't seen Vanessa much this week, so I'm surprised when I go back to my dorm after my last class today and see her waiting outside my dorm. I'd planned to call Austin before he goes out on his date with Justin . I don't know why I don't like this guy already, but I don't. A bookstore? Really? Come on, Justin.

But Austin seemed excited, so I'm trying to be supportive.

The look on Vanessa's face, though, as she stands up from where she was sitting on the floor outside of my dorm has my nerves kicking up and putting me on high alert. "You okay?"

"Can we talk?" She's not looking me in the eyes. This really can't be good.

“Of course.” I nod and unlock my door, letting her inside.

I move to sit on my bed, expecting her to join me, but she starts to pace the room. This can’t be good. “Okay, I don’t know how to start...”

“Vanessa, it’s me. You can tell me anything. Are you okay?”

She stops walking, standing just in front of me, but her hands don’t seem to know what to do. Just twitching at her sides. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her nervous before. She sucks in a shaky breath and releases it. “I met someone.”

“What?” My brain isn’t catching up to the words or isn’t hearing her right because I’m left with nothing but confusion. “Met someone?”

She nods her head, her hands still not staying still as she plays with the hem of her shirt. “I didn’t mean for it to happen, Vaughn. I wasn’t looking to meet someone else or to... to...”

“To what?” My right eyebrow lifts in suspicion. What the hell is going on right now?

Her eyes are glassy as she swallows nervously, her gaze on me. “I didn’t mean to fall for someone else.”

My chest pinches with a tight pain, and I stare up at the girl who’s been my girlfriend for almost half a decade. Is she kidding me right now? “You cheated on me?” I barely manage to croak, my throat feels tight and sore.

“No.” She sits down on the bed next to me, crossing one of her legs under the other and facing me. “I mean, maybe like emotionally?” It’s said like she’s unsure, but I mean, she’s telling me she fell for someone else?

“Emotionally? Who is it?”

She wipes away a rogue tear that slides down her cheek, and I kind of want to help her brush it away, but I don’t touch her. I don’t want her to be sad, but what the hell? “Just a guy I met in algebra.”

And math remains my damn enemy. “A guy you met in algebra?” I repeat dumbly.

“I’m so sorry, Vaughn. It was just studying, but I can’t deny I feel something for him. That I want to explore something with him.”

I feel sick and stand up from the bed, trying to get some distance. I trusted her, and she’s off falling for someone else? Some smart math guy. This is just great. “So you’re breaking up with me?” I check.

She lets out a soft cry, more tears falling, but then nods her head as she stands up. “I didn’t mean for this to happen, but you have to admit it’s been weird since we got here.”

“Weird how?” Okay, maybe I’ve been a little moody, but this has been a big change. I needed her to lean on, not start fucking some other guy. I know she said nothing happened, but how do I know that?

“Just... you’ve been distant and moody. I’m not really used to you being moody. I was alone, Vaughn.”

“You were alone? The girl I’ve been dating has apparently been off with some other guy, and my best friend is miles away.”

She flinches and shakes her head. “It always goes back to Austin, doesn’t it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I cross my arms, getting pissed-off now. Austin has nothing to do with her cheating on me with some guy. Physically or emotionally, it’s all the same, isn’t it?

“Nothing.” She shakes her head and wipes at her face. “I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen... it just sort of did.” I’m about to open my mouth to tell her these things don’t just happen, but she beats me to it. “It shouldn’t have happened, Vaughn. Not if we were actually meant to be.”

I stare at her in shock because I thought I’d always have Van—she’s been a constant in my life. Comforting. And now she’s going off with some math guy. “So that’s just it?”

“I hope not,” she says quietly and walks closer to me. I flinch when she reaches up to touch my face, and she pulls back. “I hope we can be friends again someday. I’m so sorry. I never, ever wanted to hurt you.”

“Yeah. Right,” I say snidely, but she takes it in stride and doesn’t try to touch me again.

She walks toward the door and puts her hand on the handle. “I’m here, if you ever need to talk.”

I don’t say anything because there really isn’t anything else to say. She leaves, and I flop back down on my bed, my heart aching, and I think about calling Austin. He’d know what to say. He’d make it better, but he’s probably on his date.

I’m all alone in this world.

I decide I can’t stay here and sulk like I want to, so I take a quick shower, put on some cologne and a nice shirt and jeans before walking the short distance from my

dorm toward the little houses that line the street just off campus.

It's barely dark out, but that doesn't stop the many house parties from going strong already. I make a few stops, finding the free alcohol without any trouble. I even play pool at one of the houses with complete—yet very nice—strangers before stumbling back to my dorm.

I've had way too much of way too many types of alcohol, and my body feels a little tingly and numb, but I make it up to my room to let myself in and strip out of my shirt before falling on my bed.

I grab my phone out of my jeans before trying—and failing—to push them off. I still have one foot stuck in them but can't be bothered to finish the job as I find Austin's name and call him.

He picks up on the third ring—that's just great. Three whole rings. If he called me, I'd pick up on the first one. "Vaughn?"

I can hear the concern in his voice, and whatever animosity I was feeling over his three rings to pick up vanishes, and I'm left with a warmer feeling than even the copious amount of alcohol could provide.

"Vaughn? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Oh. Right. Words. Words are totally helpful. For some reason, that makes me laugh. But actual words don't come out.

"Vaughn? Are you drunk?"

"How did you knooooow?" I end up singing the question. Still counts.

“You laugh like that when you’ve had too much to drink.” Of course, he knows that about me. He knows everything about me. “Vaughn, talk to me.”

“I’m fine. Just...” I sigh and look up at the ceiling of my dorm, the room starting to spin a little. “Vanessa broke up with me.”

I hear him curse, and I close my eyes. “What happened?”

“She’s gone. Met a math genius and left my dumb ass. She’s gone. You’re gone. I’m aaaalllll alone.” Am I singing again? Maybe. Who cares?

“I’m not gone,” I hear him say, but my eyes stay closed. If I keep them closed with his voice in my ear like this, it’s almost like he’s here.

Soon, I just drift off.

Wrapped up in my best friend’s arms where nothing can hurt me.

16

AUSTIN

“Vaughn, answer the door.” I pound on the door again, my heart racing. I’ve seen him drunk a few times, but he’s never sounded like that. He was distraught. Vanessa broke up with him?

What the hell is going on?

I’m ready to go down to the lobby and demand a key when the door opens. A very rumpled, disoriented Vaughn finally answers the door, with one leg in his jeans and one out, shirtless, and his hair a mess.

“Are you okay?”

“Are you really here?” He puts a hand to his head, looking wobbly on his feet.

I walk into the room, letting the door close behind me. “Yes. Of course I’m here. You didn’t sound so good on the phone.”

He chuckles, but it’s half-hearted as he kicks off his jeans and barely makes it to the bed before face-planting. His black boxer briefs hug his ass, but I quickly look away as I sit down next to his head.

“Vaughn, talk to me. What happened with Vanessa?”

“She met someone.” His voice is muffled by the mattress.

“She met someone?” I repeat to make sure I heard him right. How could she do that? They were happy...

“Yup.” He climbs up so his head is resting on my thigh, and I brush my hand through his hair. “She said she didn’t mean for it to happen, but that it shouldn’t have if we had what she thought we did.” He brings his hand up to his head again, “Ngh. I don’t think that made sense. My head hurts.”

“I’m sure it does. How much did you drink?”

“Don’t know. I took everything that was offered.”

Well, that’s... worrisome. “Do I really have to have a talk with you about safety? You can’t just take things if you don’t know what they are.”

“It was alcohol.”

“They could have spiked your drink. That’s dangerous.”

He just hugs my leg and groans. “My heart hurts. I’m all alone.”

I try to soothe him, dragging my fingers through his hair again. “Shh. You’re not alone. I’m here.”

He peers up at me through glassy, red eyes. “You look nice. Why do you look so nice?”

I laugh slightly at that. “Thanks, buddy.”

“You had a date. I ruined your date.” He lays his head back down on my leg, and I continue stroking his hair.

“Nah. It was pretty much over when you called.”

“Why’s that?” He sounds sleepy now as he snuggles against me, and I settle back against the wall, getting slightly more comfortable. His head resting in my lap.

“Eh, he was maybe a little too much like me. I don’t actually want to date myself.”

“Goodbye, Justin.” He doesn’t sound too broken up about it, but I can’t help but laugh at that.

“Yeah. He’s a nice guy but no chemistry.”

“Gotta have chemistry,” he mumbles, and I smile.

“I’m sorry about Van.”

“Me too. I didn’t see that one coming.”

I didn’t either. I spent the past four years trying to be totally fine with Vanessa and Vaughn eventually getting married, being endgame, and now they’re just broken up. I can’t seem to reconcile that in my brain at the moment.

“Hey, Austin?”

“Yeah?” I absently brush my hand through his hair, looking around his dorm room that has only this bed, and yet is still bigger than my dorm room. Fucking jocks.

“Are you still in love with me?”

Good. Lord. I look down and see he's gazing up at me, his eyes curious. I have to assume it's the alcohol that's making him ask, even though he seems quite a bit more sober now than when he called two hours ago. "Does it matter?"

"You always matter to me." He says it so effortlessly, making my heart kick up a beat.

"I'm not sure I'll ever stop loving you, Vaughn."

"I love you too, you know?" Goddammit. I can't hear this. He snuggles into me, and before I know it, he's snoring. Thank God. I know he meant he loves me as a friend, but it does dumb things to my insides when he says that.

It's hard for my brain to separate the two things. And now... Vaughn is single for the first time in a long time. Not that it really matters, of course, but try telling my stupid heart that.

The night was rough. Vaughn woke up twice to run down the hallway to the communal bathrooms to puke and then came back and passed out, tossing and turning for hours. I grabbed him an electrolyte drink and some aspirin, but it's clear he's still feeling it this morning.

"Wanna talk about it?" I ask as he tries to choke down some water.

"Not much to talk about. She dumped me. Said she wants to be friends, but I don't know how to do that."

"Hey, you're pretty good at being a friend," I try, but he doesn't smile. I hate seeing my best friend so broken like this. This is so unlike him.

"When do you have to leave?"

“I’m free until Monday morning.”

His eyes light up now. “So you’ll stay tonight too?”

I grin at him, feeling happy just because he’s happy, which is an all too familiar feeling when it comes to Vaughn Montgomery. “Yeah. I’ll stay tonight too.”

“Good. Promise I won’t drink myself stupid then.”

He leans back against the wall, his feet dangling over the bed. I’m sitting the same way, and he leans his head on my shoulder. I have to remind myself that we’re just two friends. Nothing has changed. He’s still straight, and I’m still just that sad guy in love with his best friend.

“You’re going to have to feed me though,” I say when my stomach grumbles.

He groans. “I don’t think I can smell food right now without hurling. Who can do this every weekend?”

I laugh. “I’ve definitely seen some people trying to already this year.”

“Not for me.” He takes another sip of water and thankfully, keeps it down. “Give me ten. I’ll walk with you to the dining hall.”

“I can just go somewhere close and pick something up. I don’t want you to feel sick.”

“No way. I finally have you here with me. We’re eating breakfast together.”

He looks a little green, but after more water and more aspirin, we finally make it to the dining hall. He manages to eat some toast, and I try not to grab anything that’s going to turn his stomach.

After that, he seems to have more life in him, and we walk around campus, him showing me where he has practice and even some of the buildings he has classes in. “It’s a great campus,” I say honestly. I think I would have been okay here, it’s different enough from Big Bend, but I still don’t feel much regret for not going here.

Not until I see my best friend’s sad eyes and know he’s already dreading when I have to leave. I am too, for that matter.

“We need to make plans to hang out more,” I say to him as we arrive at his dorm.

“Yeah?” He looks way too happy about that, but honestly... same.

“Yeah. I didn’t go to KU to get away from you. I don’t want that, Vaughn. I just needed new experiences. Further from home.”

“Yeah.” He sits down on his bed, and I follow. “I get that, I guess. Kind of.”

I chuckle. “But I do think you should talk to more people here. Let them see the real Vaughn. I have no doubt they’ll love you.”

“Like you love me?” His question takes me by surprise, and I want to joke about him being a dick, but I can’t seem to.

“No, asshole.”

“Because no one will love me like you love me.” He says it matter-of-factly, and I’m not sure where he’s going with this.

“Are you still drunk?”

He rolls his eyes at that, but I can’t help but notice he’s staring at my lips. That can’t

be right. His eyes move back up to meet mine, and I see a question there. What it is, I'm not sure, but he's curious about something.

"No." His voice is quiet. "I've really missed you."

I release a quick breath. "I've missed you too."

He licks his dry lips and then is looking at mine again. I shift uncomfortably on the bed, not sure what caused this little bout of staring. I want to know what he's thinking right now, but I'm also terrified.

He's never looked at me like this. Sure, we cuddle, and we're close, but his gaze is... intense. He's breathing hard, and if I didn't know better, I'd say he was about to lean in and kiss me.

I stand up quickly, even though I'm sure I read all that wrong. He just broke up with his girlfriend. He's lonely and confused.

No way in hell am I taking advantage of that. It's clear my quick move away from him startled him as he looks over at where I'm now standing by the window, looking down at the campus below.

"What's for dinner? I'm starving." I'm really not, but our breakfast was more lunchtime, and we did walk around for quite a while.

He's still watching me carefully, but thankfully, he seems to shake it off long enough to get up and suggest we go check it out.

I can't help but think something weird just happened, but I'm trying not to think too hard about it.

But I still wonder if he felt it too.

17

VAUGHN

O kay, so this week at school wasn't so bad, even though I totally got dumped last week. I haven't talked to Vanessa, and I don't think I'm ready for that yet, but I'm not really all that mad at her.

It sucks, and I miss her, but I'm not really as heartbroken as I thought I'd be. Especially after spending most of last weekend with Austin. Thank fuck we didn't have a football game, but we do this weekend.

However, it's Friday, and I'm done with classes until Monday morning, so Austin is coming here to stay the night. I tried to talk him into a football game, but of course, he dipped out of that one. We set it up last weekend, right before he left to help me not be so sad about it. It worked because I was in a much better mood this week.

I even hung out with a couple of guys from the team—the ones who are benched like me, and one of them happens to be in my psychology class.

I've had a lot of time to think this week too, about Vanessa and Austin. How I wasn't all that sad about the breakup with Vanessa. I mean, I was for that night, but I healed from it. I'm okay. But if Austin would have been totally done with me? If we hadn't talked so much since we started college, even though it hasn't felt like enough—that would break me.

I have no doubt.

So what does that mean? I'm not completely sure. I can't say I've never thought about being more than friends with Austin—it was always hypothetical because I had a girlfriend, but if I'm being totally honest, I've thought about it.

Especially since he told me he was in love with me. And really, really especially since I became single too and he was there. He showed up because he knew I was upset, and that's all he needed to know.

I couldn't stop looking at his mouth—it's pretty, with full pink lips, kind of in the shape of a heart—and thinking about what it would have been like to kiss him. I thought about it most of last weekend—at least the part where I didn't feel like I was close to dying.

And I don't think it would be bad—not bad at all. I don't think it would feel weird or wrong in any way. It's all I can really think about this week. Would he want to kiss me? I mean, I know he said he was in love with me, but he also said he didn't know what that love really meant.

That maybe he was confused. That's why I had to ask him again. He said he was, but I get the impression that maybe he still doesn't want to be. Maybe we just need to kiss.

See if it could be more. Maybe it would be totally awkward—like kissing your brother. I cringe, secretly hoping it wouldn't feel that way. I realize I'm actually holding out hope it will be good—that is, if he actually wants to kiss me.

He may not want to. Maybe he found someone else this week and realized he only wants to be friends.

My panic starts to rise, and I suddenly wish I could talk to Vanessa or Austin about this. Which—for obvious reasons—I can't. I will talk to Austin, but he's part of this

equation, and well, Vanessa... She might not be too thrilled about me already thinking about kissing someone else, even though she kind of started it.

I laugh to myself, thinking about how both of them would probably mock me a little for being immature, but this is brand-new territory for me. I've always cared about Austin—but these feelings... like wanting to maybe kiss him—yeah, that's fairly new.

I feel like a little kid, waiting for him to arrive, and when he knocks on my door, I nearly pull the door off the hinges, opening it for him. He just laughs and lets me hug him before pulling him inside.

“Hey,” he laughs, totally used to my clinginess.

“Hey, I was starting to think you weren't coming.”

He shakes his head at me for being ridiculous. “I'm actually a little earlier than I thought I'd be. My last class got canceled.”

“I'm sure that hurt your academic heart,” I tease.

“Totally.” He puts his bag down next to the door and then flops onto my bed like he belongs here—and as far as I'm concerned, he does. “So, what do you have planned for us? Please tell me there are no frat parties in my future?”

I smile and then sit down next to him on my bed. “Nah. I think I'm done drinking for the next decade.”

He snorts. “You're ridiculous.”

“Did you see Justin this week?” I have to ask—I've been dying to ask, but I also didn't mean to sneer his name like that. I can't seem to help it.

“Yeah, a couple of times.” I don’t realize my face is doing anything, but apparently, it’s showing how I’m feeling because it makes Austin cackle. “Relax. We have classes together, and I think he’s perfectly fine with being just friends. There was no spark on either side. Trust me.”

I guess I feel a little better now. And no, I still can’t completely work out why, except I can’t stop thinking about tasting his lips, and I can’t do that with Justin in the way.

“You’re looking at me funny. Are you okay?”

Nope. I’m thinking about kissing my best friend after years of thinking we were just friends—best friends—but still. “I’m fine.”

“Have you seen Vanessa?”

I shake my head, not really wanting to talk about her, but I know he’s probably worried about her too. They’re friends. “Nah, I think she’s busy falling in love or some shit. Or she already is.”

“Or she’s just dating this guy and seeing where it’s going to lead, now that she’s single.”

I glare at him. But when I glare at him, it’s barely an actual glare because I can’t ever be mad at him. “I hate when you’re logical.”

He chuckles and stands up. “Feed me. I’m starving.”

I take a moment to look at him—really look at him. Shorter than me but not actually a short guy. On the smaller side, sure, but his biceps are hugged by his t-shirt sleeves right now, and they aren’t even close to scrawny—he’s all lean muscle. I know for a fact he has defined abs—not chiseled or anything, but he’s toned. His dirty blond hair

is tousled from the wind, probably from a full day of walking to classes, and his light-blue eyes are almost clear, shining with promise and mirth. Happiness. He looks really happy right now. Happier than I've ever seen him.

His jaw is sharp, with high cheekbones and full lips that I only want to kiss more now. In short, my best friend is absolutely stunning. How did I not see it before? I guess I did, but I didn't know I was attracted to him.

And I think that's what I'm feeling now.

"Vaughn?" He looks worried now, and I try to shake it off, standing up and smiling at him.

"Right. Food. How about we go to an actual restaurant instead of the dining hall? There's some really good food downtown."

"Sure." His smile just does something to my insides, making them gooey, and again, I feel this insane pull toward him—I want to kiss him so badly, but I don't know if he really wants that.

I chicken out again, and then we start the short walk off campus toward a little college downtown area that has a ton of shops, restaurants, and even a bookstore—because I can do that too, Justin.

When we get back to my dorm room, we have full bellies, and Austin has a couple of new books with him. "That was fun," he says with a smile, and I watch as he strips out of his shirt. I seriously can't stop watching him.

I think it's starting to freak him out too, but I can't stop. I move closer to him, and he actually backs up until his back hits the wall, my much bigger body blocking him as he looks into my eyes, studying me.

“Are you okay?”

I shake my head from side to side slowly, my eyes sweeping over his beautiful face and landing on his lips that are slightly parted with surprise.

“What’s wrong?” He sounds terrified, but I don’t think it’s because he’s afraid of me. He knows better than that. I think he’s worried for me.

I reach up and cup his cheek with my hand, my thumb sweeping over his cheekbone. I watch as he swallows hard, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“Vaughn? What’s wrong?”

“Are you still in love with me?”

He looks surprised by the question, even though I asked him last weekend. “What’s going on?”

I drop my hand down enough for my thumb to sweep over his lower lip, plump and soft. “Please, just answer me.”

“I told you, I don’t think I’ll ever stop.”

“But you’re trying to, right?” I don’t know why that sends fear through me, but it does. I don’t want him to stop loving me.

“What’s this about?” He’s watching me carefully now, but he doesn’t push me away.

“I just want to know.”

“If I’m trying not to be in love with you?” I nod. “I don’t know. I can’t think with

you standing this close.” That gets my attention, and I look from his lips to his eyes, seeing his confusion. “You make me dumb.”

The right side of my mouth kicks up into a cocky grin now. “Because you want me to kiss you?”

“Vaughn.” His eyes darken a little as his hand wraps around the wrist of the hand I currently have on his cheek. “Don’t.”

“Don’t kiss you?” I’ve moved in closer to him. The cloth of my shirt brushes the bare skin of his chest, and I curse the fact that I didn’t take my shirt off.

My eyes dart to his mouth as he licks his lips, his pink tongue subtly running along the full bottom lip my thumb was just on. “Don’t tease me. It’s cruel.”

I swallow hard now, letting my hand slide back into his soft hair. “I would never tease you, and I would never hurt you. I just need to hear that you want me to kiss you before I do it.”

He smiles, but it’s cautious. Like maybe this is a trap. Which tracks for Austin. He’s smart—sometimes too smart for his own good. He overthinks everything. “I’ll never say no to you kissing me...”

That’s really all I need, even though I know there was likely more to that sentence. All I needed to know is that he wants me to kiss him, and I don’t think about anything else. It doesn’t matter. The only way to actually know if kissing him will feel good is to do it.

So I do. I let my fingers thread through his hair, and I crash my mouth into his, making him grunt in surprise. But as soon as our lips touch, it’s all over for me—because that spark is there.

It's not a guy I'm kissing instead of a girl. It's Austin, and it feels right.

He finally starts to move with me, his arms wrapping around my neck as I feast on his sweet mouth. Sucking on his bottom lip, making it swollen and so very mine. That's what this feels like right now—a claiming.

He's mine.

My tongue licks across the seam of his mouth, and he doesn't hesitate to open for me, allowing me to stroke his tongue with my own. To explore his lush mouth. The whimpers he makes as he holds onto me and kisses me back with everything he has should be illegal because I get why he said I make him dumb. I can't think. I can barely breathe.

All I want is more.

But then he starts to pull back. I chase his mouth with my own, and he laughs, kissing me over and over, biting at my lips as he seems to force himself to pull back. We're both panting, hungry for each other. I can feel his hard dick against my leg, and my own cock is throbbing, but I can tell he wants to talk.

I'd much rather kiss some more, but I'm not going to be a pushy asshole.

“What's happening?”

I can't resist a quick peck against his pouty mouth and grin. “Kissing. Lots and lots of kissing.”

“But...” He drops his arms from around my neck, and I watch in fascination as he brings two fingers to his lips, running them over them. “We don't kiss.”

“We didn’t. We do now. Or at least I want to.”

“But you’re . . .”

“Straight?” I say on a laugh. “I think we’re past that.” He bites on his bottom lip, and I can’t resist reaching up and freeing his lip from his teeth because— mine . “I really want to kiss you some more.”

But instead of doing that, he moves past me and goes to sit on my bed. He looks up at me. “What changed? Is it because you and Vanessa broke up?”

I sit down next to him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Are you lonely?”

My anger starts to rise a little bit because that’s why he thinks I kissed him? “You know I’ve had three girls, this week alone, hit on me. And that’s not even the most in a week since I’ve been here.”

I can see he’s a little pissed-off now, his scowl deepening. “Why are you telling me that?”

I try to return his scowl but fail. “Because if I was just lonely, I could hook up. I don’t want that.” I really, really don’t. I’m not a player. I never have been, and he should know better.

“But . . .”

“But what?” I ask, my tone a little sharper than I meant it to be.

“You’re not gay, Vaughn.”

“And since you’re the one who goes to the more liberal college, shouldn’t you know that there are many sexualities out there?” I know because I started researching more and more when he came out. I didn’t want to be an ignorant asshole.

“But . . .” He opens his mouth and then closes it. “But . . .”

I can’t help but laugh at him being speechless, it doesn’t happen often. I nudge him with my arm and roll my eyes dramatically. “Jeez. I guess I’m going to have to teach you some things. Sexuality isn’t fixed. I don’t think so anyway. I think it’s fluid. And while no, I’ve never been attracted to another guy before, lately, I’ve come to the conclusion that I am very,”—I turn to look him right in the eyes—“very attracted to you.”

He gulps. And I mean actually full-on gulps. “You are?”

I nod with a smile, then push my hand through his thick hair and lean my forehead against his. “Very.”

“When did this happen?”

I grin. “I don’t know. I think it’s been there, under the surface, for a long time.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to not be a coward right now. “I think I’m in l?—.”

He covers my mouth with his hand and shakes his head before I can get the rest out. His eyes are wide, and he looks terrified. I frown beneath his palm. “Don’t. Please don’t.”

“What?” The sound is still muffled by his hand, and I reach up to remove it. “You don’t want me to say it?”

He shakes his head and then stands up, walking away from me but turning to look at me. “This is...” He’s breathing hard. “This is a lot. Something I never thought could ever...” He shakes his head and stops himself. “Look, I can’t be a rebound for you after Vanessa or some kind of experiment.” I start to argue with him, more anger bubbling up, but he holds up a hand to stop me. “If you really...” He stops again and puffs out a ton of air before looking back at me. “If you really want to kiss me again and maybe even more?—”

“So much more,” I cut in emphatically because I want it all. That kiss was epic. I want to do it again and again, and I can’t even imagine what it’ll be like when I get my hands on him.

He smiles shyly at me but then quells it. “Maybe even more, then we need to take it slow.”

“You know we’ve been together for a long time, right?” I stand up, stalking toward him, but as I reach him, he puts his hands on my chest, keeping me from kissing him.

“Not like this, we haven’t. I need . . .”

“Please tell me you don’t need more space.” I think it will kill me.

He shakes his head. “No, but I just...” He sighs. “I need to take it slowly. I need this to be real if it’s going to happen.”

I grasp his chin and tilt it up so he’s looking into my eyes. “It’s very real. I’ll never hurt you. You know that.”

“Not on purpose, you won’t, but Vaughn...” His eyes are watery, and shit, I don’t want to make him cry. How did I mess this up? “You’re everything to me. I don’t want to lose that.”

“You won’t.” That much I’m sure of. He can’t ever get rid of me.

He smiles at that and pats my chest with his hand before moving back. “We should sleep. I have to get out of here tomorrow before the crowd comes in for the game.”

I frown. “So no more kissing?”

He grins, shaking his head at me fondly, and I can never tire of that look on his face. “Not tonight.”

“But maybe next weekend?” I sound like a hopeful idiot, but I couldn’t care less as long as he says yes.

“If you still want to kiss me next weekend, yeah. More kissing next weekend.”

I actually do a little whoop sound and fist-pump at that before undressing down to my boxer briefs and climbing into bed with him to not kiss.

Because I can wait a week. There’s no doubt in my mind I’m going to want to kiss him next weekend and every one after that, if he’ll let me.

It sounds like I’m going to have to convince him of that though.

Challenge. Accepted.

18

AUSTIN

O kay, this is no big deal. Not at all. Just my best friend, who I've been in love with forever, is coming to my dorm tonight to maybe kiss me again. No reason to be freaking the fuck out.

Right?

I think I might have hit my head or something last week and I'm just imagining it. That has to be it. But when I talked to Vaughn this week—and I mean every single time I talked to him, whether it was a video chat or texting—he mentioned how much he couldn't wait to kiss me again.

He has to be messing with me, except Vaughn doesn't do that. He's not one to play games—ever. He wears his heart on his sleeve. That's just the way he is, but I still can't seem to grasp that he wants to kiss me. Maybe even more than kiss me.

I saw the anger on his face when I suggested maybe this was a rebound or he was just lonely, but maybe he doesn't even realize that's what this is. Can I really go along with this if it is?

Can I kiss him and touch him? Have him for a brief moment in time before he moves on to his actual happily ever after?

I'm a selfish idiot because I think I can. I mean, it'll absolutely kill me—no doubt

about it. But I don't think I'm strong enough to turn down this opportunity. One thing I know for sure though is I can't get lost in it.

In the fantasy that he's in love with me too. I swear that's actually what he was going to say before I stopped him, and I just can't let that happen. It's a rule I have to stick to. No great declarations of love. And even though I'm even more sure, now that we've been apart, that I'm actually in love with him, I can't let him say that to me.

I can't get swept up, or I'll never come back from it.

This is just me being selfish—indulging—and maybe we'll both get something great from it. He'll get his rebound and his confidence back. And maybe I'll gain some confidence and get to explore my sexuality with someone I love and trust.

It's a win-win really.

I hope.

I don't get to sit and think too much longer about it, thank God, because there's an excited knock on my door, and I leap off my bed to answer it. Vaughn is standing there, his bag over his shoulder, a State hoodie covering his long torso. That beautiful grin on his face. "Still want to kiss me?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

His grin kicks up even more as he moves gracefully inside my dorm, letting the door fall closed behind him and wrapping his arms around my waist. His lips meet mine with a hunger and intensity I never could have imagined.

I moan into his mouth, opening for him, letting his tongue sweep inside and own me as I wrap my arms around his neck. "I've missed you," he says against my lips and then goes right back to kissing me so hard, I'm left breathless and aching.

He clings to me, turning his head to look around the room. “Evan already left for the weekend,” I supply.”

“Good.” He drops his bag and then lifts me up without much warning, and I wrap my legs around him, ready to let him do whatever he wants to me. I revel in his strength as he carries me to my bed, letting me fall onto it but covering my body with his, never breaking the kiss.

I rush to get his hoodie off over his head and toss it to the floor, my hands roaming all over his body, under his t-shirt and over the muscles of his back. I need to talk to him. We should use words, but I can’t think.

He really does make me dumber. I wish that bothered me more.

I’m thinking of words to say, but then he sucks on my tongue so hard, it makes my cock jerk against the denim of my jeans... and this is fine. We can talk later.

I rip his shirt off and start kissing down his neck to his chest, while my hands run over his insane torso. “God, you’re too perfect.”

“Have you seen you?” he pants as he moves his hands down to the hem of my shirt, guiding it up and off me. He leans back on his shins, looking at me like he could eat me alive.

“You’re really not freaked-out, are you?”

He cocks a brow at me, his big hand sweeping down over my chest, swirling his fingers over my belly button and down the light trail of hair there. “Why would I be?”

I try not to laugh at him. He sounds so sincere, and I know he is. His muscles are pulled tight, making all his veins pop and bulge with each breath. I want to lick them.

So I do. I lean up and lick along the very prominent vein in his bicep. He groans, sounding pained, and I can't help but notice the bulge in his jeans. We match.

“You sure about this, Vaughn?” I have to ask him, even though I don't want to stop. No part of me wants to stop and talk right now—another first for me.

“What do I have to do to convince you?”

I lick my lips, my eyes roaming over his torso. He has more chest hair than I do, but considering I have next to nothing, that's not too difficult. But I love the dusting of light hair between his pecs, my hand moving up his solid abs and brushing through the hair.

“I wanna suck you,” I blurt out, and I watch his pupils dilate and his jaw flex with tension before he nods his head almost comically. It would be funnier if I wasn't so horny.

I flip us—mostly just me signaling that I want to switch positions—until he moves his body under mine and I'm between his legs. Okay, Austin, no getting lost in this. It's sex. Rebound sex. Experience.

It's okay. You can do this.

My hand is trembling, though, as I trace the trail of dark hair from his belly button to the top of his jeans with my finger. But Vaughn is Vaughn, and he notices instantly, his hand going to my wrist to stop the movement. “We don't have to do anything you aren't ready for.”

“I'm ready,” I say, my voice husky and quiet but certain. “I'm so damn ready for this. You have no idea.”

He grins at me. "I have some idea." He looks down at his cock, hard and pushing against the denim of his jeans, begging to be freed. "I got tested after Vanessa and I broke up. I don't think she actually cheated on me, but I just wanted to be sure."

I lick my lips, staring at the impressive bulge in his jeans. I nod my head absently, knowing he'd never put me in harm's way. "I've never been with anyone. I mean one kiss..."

I meet his eyes, feeling a little pathetic, but all I see in his eyes is untamed lust. "So we're good to go then."

I take a deep breath, my hands going to the button of his jeans, flicking it open. "We are."

He helps me get his jeans and his briefs off. It takes some effort because he's really hard. I've only seen dicks other than mine when I've watched porn, but I can confidently say that Vaughn's is the prettiest dick on the planet. Long and thick with a vein running through it. Flared at the tip and swollen with desire. He's leaking, and I can't help but whimper when I see the drop of precum forming at his slit.

"I'm dying here, Austin." He wiggles a little underneath me, and it does funny things to my insides, thinking about this strong, confident man being putty in my hands. It's a heady feeling.

"I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Anything you do will feel good, but I think I'd like it more if you were naked."

My eyes flick up to his face, seeing again that he's totally sincere. I have to admit a part of me thought he would want me to keep my clothes on. That maybe a blowjob from a guy wouldn't be so bad for a straight guy because he could pretend...

But I should've known better. Vaughn would never do that. He's all-in on this, whatever this is.

I stand up and quickly remove all my clothes, his eyes never leaving me. And when they settle on my hard cock—which will make it impossible for him to miss that I'm a guy—I only see stark desire there. Want.

He wants me. My body. This is actually happening.

I climb back between his legs, and my eyes settle on his cock, which is, if possible, even harder than it was before. I feel a little dizzy, like I can't believe this is actually going to happen.

“Hey, look at me.” His voice grounds me, and I do what he says, his dark-blue eyes shining with care. He may not be in love with me for real, but he does care about me, that much I know for sure. “We don't do anything you don't want to.”

I take the moment to wrap my hand around his thick shaft and watch his entire body tense with pleasure. “I want.” I stroke him slowly, using his precum to make the glide easier. “I want this so damn badly.”

I watch as he tips his head back, his abs and pecs flexing as I work him over slowly, playing with the grip, making it a little tighter and watching his response. “Yes. Like that.”

The tendons in his neck are pulled tight, and he's so sexy like this. Taking his pleasure. I want to make this good for him, but I believe him when he says I am.

I lean forward a little, still holding onto his hard cock and lick along the vein. I swear he nearly jolts off the bed, his hips thrusting forward. I did that. Me. No one else. My own cock is leaking, and I can't stop myself from rutting against the bed while I take

the tip of him into my mouth and suck. I'm met with a burst of flavor that's new but not unpleasant.

Not at all. I close my eyes and suck on him, tasting the evidence of him enjoying this as I thrust against the mattress in blind lust. I have Vaughn's cock in my mouth. This is really happening.

"Fuck, Austin." He's panting, and his fingers slide through my hair, but he doesn't push more of himself inside me. "I'm so close already. I'm not going to last."

That's probably a good thing because my muscles are pulled tight, my cock leaking, and my body is on autopilot. I'm going on pure instinct as I lick and suck his cockhead, wanting to take more of him into my mouth but also wanting to take my time and explore.

I stroke him with my hand and take a little more than an inch at a time, reveling in his big hand in my hair. He's threading his fingers through the strands and holding onto me. Like he needs us to be connected in more ways than one.

It's all too damn much and not enough at the same time.

My balls are pulled up tight against my body, and when he curses, tugging on my hair, it's all over for me. I pull off his cock and cry out his name as I lose it against the bed, my cum covering the comforter below us.

"Oh fuck," Vaughn says. "Open your mouth."

I'm wrung out and can barely move, but I manage to do that just in time as his hand wraps around mine, which had previously stopped moving. He strokes himself until his cum is spurting into my mouth and on my cheeks and my chin. He makes a mess, and it's the hottest thing I've ever experienced—porn or otherwise.

I swallow what managed to get into my mouth, loving the flavor of him as he wrings out the last of his cum and collapses back on the bed. I lay my head on his thigh and breathe deeply, trying to catch my breath and not caring about the sticky mess.

“You look wrecked.” He says it so fondly, and I feel his hand in my hair again.

I gaze up at him. “Can’t move.”

“Come here,” he says softly, and okay fine, I’ll move for him.

I’m surprised when I climb up his strong body, though, because his lips immediately meet mine. He’s not freaked-out by the taste of his own release. If anything, it makes him kiss me harder, and he licks my chin and my cheeks, making me cackle.

“Are you cleaning me?”

“Someone had to. You’re a mess.” His voice is throaty and sexy as hell before he kisses me again, both of us sharing his release.

“We should change the sheets and get cleaned up for real,” I say, but I’m not looking forward to doing that in the communal shower.

“See, should have gotten your own place,” he says, smacking my bare ass with his big hand.

“Hey.” I rub the sore spot with my hand and laugh. “No one told you to be a total jock and live in the jock dorms.”

He laughs too, and we climb up, finding some tissues to take care of some of the mess before we sneak into the showers and quickly rinse off. He wanted to join me in my stall, but I had to put my foot down.

When we get back to the room, we change the sheets, laughing the whole time. It's light and fun—what we've always had—but it's more too. I try to remind myself for the hundredth time not to get too lost in it all.

But it feels almost impossible. We go out to eat, and then when we get back, we fall into bed together, kissing and touching but not going further. Not really needing to.

Warning bells are going off in my head, but I try to convince myself that it'll all be okay anyway.

Because a bigger part of me really needs this, no matter what the fallout brings.

VAUGHN

Having sex with your best friend is awesome. I highly recommend it. Though, I'm not sure if what we've done so far can be considered sex. I think so. After he blew me for the first time, he decided he needed more practice and did it again the next morning.

It was even better the second time around. And before I had to leave to get to the game, we kissed on his bed, totally naked and grinding our cocks together until I wrapped my hand around both of us. We came our brains out just like that. Just rutting against each other with pure hunger.

Who knew another cock could feel so good against my own? I certainly didn't, but I'm all for it happening again and again. He's kissing me so sweetly now in my bed. He came to me this time, and I almost curse having a game this weekend. I don't even get to play, but I've had increased practice time, and who knows? Maybe I'll get to play once this year.

But I want this all the time. I hate that he goes to a different school. "How are classes going?"

Of course, that's what he wants to talk about. I suck on his bottom lip and lift his shirt up, trying to get it off him, but he only laughs and resists.

"We still have to use words sometimes, don't we?" he asks but doesn't sound too

sure.

“Fuck words.” I start kissing his neck, sucking and licking. I can’t get enough of him.

“We talk all week because I can’t touch you.”

“I know.” He lets his head fall back, giving me better access. “And you said you were having trouble with math.”

“I am. But I don’t want to talk.” I barely get the words out, I’m hard and needy right now. My body missed his way too much in the past week.

“But . . .”

“Austin...” I whine, and it’s totally unsexy, but I’m fine with it.

“Ugh, fine.” He pulls his shirt off and over his head in one graceful, fluid motion, grasping the sides of my head and pulling me into a passionate kiss. Yeah, he’s not bothered by the no-talking thing.

And I do love talking to him. We talk every day. Multiple times a day. About school and football. He told me he talked to his mom, and she’s already making sure he’s going to come home for Thanksgiving. I laughed and told him my mom is already planning to invite his whole family over, like always.

We talk, and I love it, but right now, I need him. I’m desperate to feel that closeness like I’ve never felt before. Well, I guess I used to get that when he’d cuddle with me. Maybe that’s what I was doing then—just getting him closer to me because I needed it.

It makes sense, even if my brain hadn’t totally caught up yet. I think I’ve been in love with him even longer than he was with me. But he still won’t let me say it, which

bothers me, but I don't want to push.

Every time I start to say it when we're on the phone with each other, he cuts me off and changes the subject or says he has to go. It's been in the back of my mind, but... maybe I can just show him.

Like now, as I work on stripping him until he's completely naked beneath me. I drag my tongue over his skin, salty from sweat and making me hard as a rock. I taste every inch of him. Over his pecs and his hard nipples, taking my time, sucking and licking the hardened nubs. He writhes under me, his hard cock dragging against my chest as I lower myself down, licking the whole way.

"You taste good."

"You're going to kill me." His voice is hoarse, and I love it. Love that I do this to my normally very controlled best friend.

"Not a chance. I'll never let you die on me."

He chuckles, but it turns into a hearty moan as I lick down over his groin. His pubes are trimmed neatly, and I breathe him in, my nose settling between his groin and thigh. "Vaughn." I love the way he says my name. I love everything about him. It's never been like this before.

I cared about Vanessa, but it never felt like this when we were together. Like I might die if it ended. And yes, I know that's being dramatic, but it doesn't make it any less true.

I can't get enough of him.

When I turn my head and look at his hard cock and heavy balls, there's no

questioning what I want to do next. I know he has it in his head that I'm somehow just doing this for him, or that maybe I'm not in this as much as he is because I was previously straight or whatever, but I've never wanted anyone more.

I've never been more attracted to anyone in my life. It's like now that I've allowed myself to go there—to admit that I'm attracted to him—I'm not going back. Not ever. I don't wait for his argument, and I swallow his hard cock in one quick move. Well—some of it anyway. He's longer than I thought and hits the back of my throat, making me gag instantly, but I don't dare pull away.

“Vaughn, fuck!” His fingers go to my shoulder, clawing at me. “I'm sorry. Are you okay?”

I don't answer him with words, just move my hand to the base of his dick as a failsafe and then go to town. I love his taste. Not surprised at all. He's loving this, if the copious amount of precum hitting my tongue has anything to say about it, and all I can do is moan around the mouthful of cock and revel in the taste.

I love that I'm making him feel good. That's all I want to do. “Vaughn, I'm close,” he pants, his nails digging into my shoulders. “You don't have to... ahh.” I suck him harder, swirling my tongue around his slit and enjoying the taste of more precum. He's close, and I can't fucking wait to have all of him.

I hollow my cheeks, and when I open my eyes, looking up at him and seeing how totally blissed-out he is, I nearly come right then and there in my jeans, but he beats me to it. His release hits the back of my mouth, and I do my best to swallow it all as I stroke him and try not to miss a second of him writhing beneath me in pleasure, his entire body pulled taut as he curses and moans.

It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen, and when he's finished, I barely get my jeans open and my underwear down before I grasp my aching shaft. I jerk off until I'm

spilling all over his abs. I collapse onto his warm body, and he chuckles, his hands smoothing over my back. I don't even mind the sticky mess between us because it's just proof how good we make each other feel.

"How are you so good at that?"

I smile into the crook of his neck, trying to keep some of my weight off him, but I feel boneless. "I just like making you feel good."

"You definitely do."

I want to tell him I'm in love with him again, but I don't want to ruin the moment. I hate knowing it would do that. He's too stubborn for his own good. That much is for sure.

I roll off him to my back next to him, still not caring about the drying cum. "Can I tell you something that would sound really stupid to anyone else, but I know you'll get?"

He chuckles tiredly but then turns his head so he's looking at me. "Always."

I turn to look at him too. "I miss Friday night lights."

His brow crinkles, but he's grinning. "The show or the movie?"

I roll to my side and tug him into my arms. "You know what I mean, you little shit." He cackles when I tickle his side.

"I do. Stop," he laughs and shoves my hand away, but I just pull him into me even more but stop tickling him. "I know you miss Big Bend."

I do. I know it's kind of sad that I'm in a big college town, actually on the school's

football team, and I'm thinking about my small town of a couple of thousand people. Wishing for one more chance to go out underneath the high school stadium lights. But I do. "Sometimes."

I can feel him smiling, even though I have him tucked into my side.

"Do you think you'll ever go back there?" I know he's thriving in school, but a part of me hopes he'll want to move back to Big Bend someday. I've always thought of college as something to do, but I think for Austin, it's always been the beginning of something.

Something bigger.

Something better.

"I'm not sure." He's hesitant to answer me, and I know why. He doesn't have any real plans to move back there.

And I realize it really doesn't matter to me. Yeah, I'd miss my family and the town itself, but that would be nothing compared to how much I'd miss him if we don't live in the same town again someday. "Well, wherever you go, I'll go." And I mean it with my whole heart.

He slowly lifts his head, his eyes searching mine. I wait for him to argue with me or to say I can't know that, and I'm fully prepared to argue back. He looks concerned, but then he surprises me when he changes the subject all together. "College football is pretty cool. I mean, at least, it looked that way on TV."

I blink at him. "You watched?"

He smiles and lowers his head back onto my shoulder. "My best friend was on

television.”

I toss my head back and laugh, feeling pure joy. “Oh, so that’s what I had to do to get you to watch a game?”

We laugh together, and he kisses my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Vaughn. It’s going to get better and better. You’ll see.”

I hold him close to me and kiss the top of his head, but I think he’s wrong. Totally and completely wrong for the first time in his life.

Because I’m really not sure how it could get any better than this.

20

VAUGHN

This game sucks. Okay—it doesn't suck. We're actually ahead and probably going to win, but I'm in a pissy mood. And it's not like I contributed to the win in any way.

I'm in a terrible mood because Austin was supposed to come see me last night, but he had to cancel. And I know he had to. He was right to cancel when he has such an important test on Monday.

I could tell by his voice on the phone he was just as disappointed as I was, but it still sucks. Stupid college. Stupid tests. Stupid football.

I told him I could drive there after the game, but he didn't want me to fall asleep at the wheel. I also said he could stay in my dorm and study this weekend, but he said—and he was totally right—that I'd distract him.

I can't keep my hands off him when he's actually in the same town as me. So I guess I'll just have to wait until next weekend. I can make it. It's just another reason I wish I'd have pulled my head out of my ass before we went to college.

It may not be fair to Vanessa, but since she was going to break up with me anyway, it would have been better if she did it when I still had a chance at convincing Austin to come here.

But maybe that wouldn't have been better after all. He's so happy at that school. I

couldn't take that away from him, even if we were together. My brain hurts from thinking so hard, and when we pull out the win, I'm in an even worse mood as I head to the locker room to change into a suit.

Yes. An actual fucking suit. Coach requires we all change into them after a game. Why? No one knows, and no one questions it. So I change out of the uniform I didn't even get to play in and into a goddamn suit.

"Jesus, could you scowl more?" Jacob, one of the other freshmen, looks way too amused as he watches me.

"Probably," I say, not smiling because nope, I'm not going to smile. My boyfriend is stuck in a whole other town this weekend, and I don't get to hold him. Boyfriend? Is that even what he is? I don't know because he still won't let me tell him I love him.

I still think of him that way anyway. He's mine, whether he knows it or not.

"You're playing football for State," Jacob says, his eyes wide and on me like he can't believe me. And I can't either, really. This was the dream. None of us could ever even imagine it happening, but we talked about it every time we went out on that field whether it was peewee, JV or varsity. It didn't matter.

And here I am, being a totally ungrateful asshole.

"Sorry," I say sincerely. "I know. I just miss actually playing."

He grins at me and smacks my shoulder. "Cheer up, man. We should go out and celebrate the win with the team. They want us to go." He nods over to where some of the older players are getting dressed.

"Nah. Thanks though."

I sulk all the way to the dorm, wearing my stupid suit, missing my boyfriend and home. But when I get up to my dorm room, I can barely move because... there's Austin, his books on his lap and a wide smile pointed in my direction.

I rush over to him, just as he stands up, and wrap him in my arms. "You're here."

He laughs against my chest and hugs me back. "It's only been a week."

"I thought it was going to be two." I don't want to release him, and I don't. I just hold onto him, breathing him in like a total creeper.

He chuckles. "Eh, I couldn't make it."

That makes me far too happy. I reluctantly release him long enough to help him pick up his books and unlock my door. But as soon as he puts his books down on my desk and I drop his bag by the door, I'm on him again.

I kiss him hard, holding onto his face, my heart happy and full because he's here. "Wait." I pull back just enough to look at him, still holding onto his face. "I thought you needed to study."

My gut sinks because I can't let him get behind for me. He loves school. He just smiles sweetly. "I studied a lot. So much, I think my brain hurts."

"Hey, that's usually my problem," I tease, and he laughs, leaning up to kiss me again. He pulls back, both of us breathing heavily. "I don't want you to get behind because of me."

He grins again, his hand going to my tie. "A tie? Really?" He quirks his brow.

I release his face and pinch his ass. "Shut. Up."

He cackles and then pushes the suit jacket off my shoulders, going for the tie next. “I’m not going to be behind. I was worried, but the more I studied, the more I realized I already know the material. I’ll study more tomorrow, but I can spare tonight.”

“Tonight...” I say, a mixture of awe and excitement running through my blood. He’s really here. He showed up just to spend the night with me.

His fingers work the buttons on my shirt free, and he pulls it from my pants, removing it totally. My hands are everywhere, running from the sides of his face to the back of his head, pulling him in close.

He strips off his shirt, and I go for the button on his jeans. It’s a flurry of clothes flying and our mouths melded together as we reach the bed. I let him fall back, but my body follows, blanketing him.

I kiss down his neck and over his chest. “I can’t believe you’re here. That we’re...” I pull back enough to look at his long, lean torso and up to his eyes, full of lust. “That we’re really here.”

“You’re telling me,” he says with a sly grin.

I run my hand over his soft skin, feeling the hard muscle of his chest and abdomen and down the hair of his thighs. “What do you want?”

“You.” He says it instantly, so easily, and it makes my heart kick up in speed. His eyes hold onto me. “All of you.”

I think I know what he’s saying, but I need absolute confirmation. “You have to spell it out for me.”

I love the way his mouth slides into an easy, relaxed smile as he reaches for my hard

cock, stroking it slowly, his eyes never losing contact with mine. “I want this inside me.”

I run my finger over his lips. “Here?”

He shakes his head, side to side in a sexy move, releasing my cock. “Uh-uh.” He guides my hand from his lips, down over his chest, trailing slowly over his groin, bypassing his hard-as-a-rock dick to his hole, resting one of my fingers on the rim. “Here.”

I swallow, my eyes following our hands the whole time, and I’m left staring at his puckered entrance. I test it, not pressing inside, but feeling the wrinkled, soft flesh with my finger. He wiggles beneath me, his head falling back slightly.

“Yes. There.”

“I, uh...” I’m almost woozy, looking down at my finger brushing against his hole. I don’t know how my finger is going to fit there, let alone my dick. “Are you sure?”

“You’re kidding, right? I always wanted it to be you.” My eyes snap to his face, the vulnerability enough to wreck me. “But I never thought it would actually come true.”

I lean down, stealing his lips and kissing him hard. The thought of anyone else being with him this way is almost too much for me to bear. “Mine,” I growl.

He laughs. “Easy, caveman. Do you have any lube?”

I nod my head, kissing his lips softly and grounding myself. My dick is more than ready, my heart too, if I’m honest, but I don’t want to hurt him. I want to make this good for him. “Tell me what to do.”

He doesn't tease me or joke about me not knowing what I'm doing. He's kind and patient as always. "Grab the lube and put some on your fingers. Get me ready for you."

I nod, taking a deep shuddering breath and grabbing the lube from the table next to my bed. I do what he says, rubbing some between two fingers, trying to warm it up.

I watch in fascination as he parts his legs and then pulls them back, his hands under each knee, opening himself up for me. "Holy fuck." I tremble, actually shake just from seeing his tight, pink hole on display for me.

"One finger. And then two," he says, a smile on his lips. "I've played back there a little while jerking, so don't worry."

My cock jerks, just thinking about him playing with himself. "I need to see that sometime."

He chuckles, but it turns into a groan when I circle his hole with one lubed finger, taking my time to explore and see what makes him feel good as I slowly push inside. He holds his legs for me, panting, his cock leaking onto his abs.

My dick is so hard, it hurts, but no way am I rushing this. I add another finger slowly, taking my time. It's so hot and tight, I could come just from feeling this, which doesn't bode well for my stamina if I make it inside him. But I know with Austin, there'll be no judgment.

I work my fingers into him, stretching him, worried about hurting him. My cock is a hell of a lot bigger than two fingers, and I'm not ashamed to admit I'm terrified of hurting him.

Austin notices though, because of course he does. "Hey, look at me." I do as he says,

my breathing heavy and erratic. “You won’t hurt me, and if it’s too much, I know I can tell you and we’ll stop.”

“Immediately,” I say as a promise to him but also making him promise me in the same sense that he really will tell me and not try to push through.

He nods. “Promise.”

I breathe a little easier now.

“Now, get that dick inside me because if you keep this up, I’m going to come, and I want you to be inside me when I do.”

Okay, yeah. I want that. I scramble to pull my fingers free and then grab the lube, getting my dick nice and slick before positioning it at his hole. I lean forward and kiss him again, one hand resting over his heart, and I smile when I feel his is beating just as fast as mine.

I push into him slowly, and he grimaces. I don’t miss that, but he also looks blissed-out, like he needs more, so I give him just that. A little more, inch by inch, I make my way inside his body until my balls are resting against his ass.

“Yes,” he breathes, and I lean in to kiss him.

“Tell me when I can move.” It’s indescribable, the heat and the tight squeeze around my hard shaft. It makes my vision blurry, and I swear for a moment, I might pass out from the sheer pleasure of it, but I try my best to stay still. To fight every instinct to thrust into him over and over again.

“Move. Just go slow,” he says, nearly breathless.

I do as he says, pulling back and then pushing into him ever so slowly, making us both grunt and groan. We move together, but when he drops his hands from his knees and wraps his arms around my back, his mouth finds my ear. “Harder. It’s okay. It’s good. So damn good. I want more.”

That’s all I need to hear. I hold his legs apart now, pounding into him over and over, shifting my hips until he cries out, his nails clawing at my shoulders as he kisses over my neck and chest.

“There. Yes. Do that again.”

I nail his prostate over and over again, that familiar tingle trailing down my spine and into my balls. “I’m close. Too close.”

He understands what I’m saying, and I feel his hand move between our bodies, jerking himself off between us as I pound into him. He’s the first to go over but only beats me by a second.

My face goes to his neck as I muffle the sharp cry, unleashing inside him. I pump into him, spilling my cum deep inside, and revel in the sticky splash of his cum on our stomachs.

It takes everything in me not to collapse onto him with my full weight when we start to come down from the high. But when he laughs, I lift my head and look at him, trying to figure out what’s so funny. My cock is still inside him, and the ripple of his laughing sends aftershocks through me.

“I’m not sure it’s a good thing that you’re laughing after I just had the best orgasm of my life.”

He laughs some more but reaches his hand up to brush over my cheek. “I think I’m

just in shock. That was..." He bites on his puffy bottom lip, looking at me in awe. "That was everything. So much more than I ever pictured, and I can't believe it happened."

"It did." I pull his lip free from his teeth and then kiss them better softly, taking my time. "And it's going to happen again and again."

He laughs some more, and it's the most beautiful sound. I slowly pull out of him and then lay next to him on my side, pulling him into me.

"Promises, promises," he says sleepily, and I just kiss his temple and smile.

He has no idea what kind of needy monster he just unleashed.

21

AUSTIN

I had sex with my best friend last night... That's... I can't even describe it. I can't believe it actually happened. I'm trying really hard to play it cool and keep my heart in check, but when he was inside me, the care I felt... yeah.

My brain and heart are kind of at war right now.

"You sore?" His deep voice rumbles in my ear, and I roll to my side to look at him. We're both still naked, but he did put on some shorts and went to the bathroom to wet a washcloth to bring back and clean us both up before we passed out last night. So there's no drying cum making us uncomfortable.

But I already want to get nice and sticky again with him. "Nope. I'm ready for round two."

He laughs, rolling to his side too and resting his arm over me. He kisses my nose. "Liar."

"Worth it," I say with 100 percent certainty, closing my eyes and just letting myself enjoy this. I loved every second of being with him. I always do. I told myself I could go one weekend without seeing him, that I'd be okay, but that turned out to be a lie.

I love school. I like my new friends and being in a bigger town where I don't know very many people. But lying here in Vaughn's arms like this? It's familiar and

calming in a way I think I took for granted before.

“Austin...” I hear the stark honesty in his voice, just from saying my name, and I open my eyes and see the seriousness in his. “I lo—” Oh no.

I cover his mouth with my hand and give him a stern shake of my head. Did I want to tell him I love him last night when he was inside me? Yes. Too many times to count. And did I want to hear it back from him? Yes.

But I can’t let him say it. I remind myself he’s going through huge changes, that now is not the time to be in an actual relationship. And I’m falling far too easily into that role.

He sighs heavily, his shoulders slumping, and I hate that, but it’s for the best. He has to know deep down, I’m protecting us both by not letting him say it. It’ll be so much worse when this ends if he says that. I’m too weak to not believe it.

He’s quiet for a really long time, and I can see the anger in his eyes, but it’s restrained. He holds it back like he usually does with me. “There’s a Halloween party here next weekend. We should go together.”

I sit up slowly, looking down at his earnest face. “Like a date?”

He shrugs and sits up, running his fingers through his hair nervously. “Sure.”

I stand up, needing some distance, and grab a pair of shorts to pull on. It’s something to do, and it’s better to not be naked when we’re trying to talk. “I don’t know about that.”

“Why not?” His gaze is sharp, and I can see the irritation forming.

He's not serious, is he? "You're a football player at this school."

"So?" He really doesn't seem bothered by the fact that going to a party with me as his date will out him. It'll make him a gay football player in all their eyes. It could make his life harder. "I don't care if anyone knows about us, Austin. I want them to know."

See, this is the thing about Vaughn. He doesn't think things through. He's reckless, and normally, I admire the hell out of him for it. He's reckless in a way I'll never feel free enough to be. He's not careless, he cares so much, but he's brave. "Vaughn, that's insane."

"What is?" He gets off the bed, and I try to ignore his naked form.

"You don't know what they're going to think or say if they find out you're..."

"I'm what? Dating a guy?"

I huff. "We aren't dating."

His anger is more on the surface now, his brow furrowed. "Then what the hell are we doing?" He points to the bed. "We hang out and we make each other come. We kiss all the time, and I can't get enough of that, by the way. I'm in lo—" I stop him, holding my hand up because my heart can't take it.

"Don't."

He cocks his head to the side, looking at me like I've totally lost it. "Austin..."

"Don't, Vaughn. Listen, I love what we're doing." I motion toward the bed. "In bed and out. I love kissing you too, but we have to be smart about this. When you started at this school, you were dating Vanessa. They all probably assumed you were totally

straight.”

“Well, I’m not.” It’s amazing to me that he can just admit that, with no hesitation. Again, he’s brave, and I admire him for it. But I have to look out for him too. The world—it may be better in some ways, but growing up where we did, he has to know it’s not totally perfect.

There are still plenty of ignorant assholes. Especially in such a male-dominated, hetero-dominated sport like football. “I don’t want to hurt your chances of being part of this team. I know how much you love football.”

“Football isn’t everything,” he says, moving closer to me, one arm wrapping around my lower back.

“We don’t even know what this is,” I say helplessly, trying to keep us both safe. I put a finger up to his mouth to silence any argument. “I want to keep doing this, but I don’t think it’s wise to go to a party as a couple. We aren’t really a couple, Vaughn.”

He studies me carefully, and I can see the pain in his expression. He wants to argue with me. “Are you seeing someone else?”

“What?” I’m shocked by his question and shake my head. “No. Hell no.”

“Do you want to?” His voice is so soft, almost broken, and I hate that I’ve hurt him like this. That I made him think I could want anyone else while I have him.

“Vaughn, no.” I run a hand over his stubbled cheek. “I don’t want anyone but you.”

He offers me a sad smile. “But you don’t want anyone to know you’re with me, and you won’t let me call us a couple.”

Okay, we're treading on thin ice here. I know it, but I can't take this sad, sad version of Vaughn. "I just want to take things slowly. I don't want you to get hurt. You may think the guys on your team are cool, but they could surprise you."

"And if they're bigoted pricks, I don't want to be part of their team anyway."

"That's what I mean, Vaughn." I drop my hand, wondering how this day went sideways so fast. I thought for sure I'd get at least another round of sex and we'd laugh and kiss. Talk about the next time we can do it again, but now we're kind of fighting. I hate fighting with him. "You're too good for this world."

I watch as he swallows down whatever he wanted to say and then gives me a quick nod. "Okay. We won't go to the party. Can we at least have a party of our own?"

I should tell him we need to cool it. Suggest we take a weekend or two off, but I'm too weak for that. I need to feel like we're still okay.

"Yes. Of course."

Finally, he lights up a little bit, but it still feels off. Like I messed it up.

And I really hate that feeling.

22

VAUGHN

I 'm mad at him. That's new. I'm rarely mad at Austin, and I don't like it at all, but I am. I hate how quickly he shut down going to that party with me as my date. I'm not that naive. I know some of the guys on the team and around campus might have something to say about it.

But I don't care. It's none of their business who I love, and I do love Austin. He just won't let me.

I guess I thought sex would allow me to show him just how much I love him. Not that sex is the be-all and end-all in a relationship, but since he won't let me say the actual words, that was my shot. I tried to show him with every touch and every kiss. I guess it was just about getting off for him though.

And it pisses me off.

I say goodbye to a couple of guys I had my last class with and have chatted with a little bit, here and there, heading into my dorm while they go off to theirs. When I get up to my room, I grab my notes from my last class and stare at them, trying to study.

College isn't so bad. I'm actually starting to like it a lot. I even got plenty of time today in practice to run actual plays. It felt good running around until my lungs were burning.

But it all pales in comparison to what I've had with Austin since that first kiss. God, I can't stop thinking about kissing him. Even when I'm mad at him, I want to kiss him.

He must have heard my thoughts because my phone rings. When I see it's a video call from Austin, I don't hesitate to answer, even if our last conversation runs through my mind and pinches at my heart.

"Hey," I say softly, taking in all his features. His hair is windblown, and it looks like he's walking on campus somewhere.

"Hey. I have one more class but realized we hadn't talked yet today."

Yeah, because I'm pissed. I guess that's how I deal—just avoid, avoid, avoid. "Yeah, sorry. Today was a little crazy."

"Yeah?" His smile breaks my heart. I hate this. "Did you get to play the sports today?"

I give in and laugh at that because he's ridiculous. "Yup. For a whole hour."

His smile is even more vibrant now. "That's good. I'm glad. And how are classes going?"

I shrug but show him my notes anyway. "I'm studying the hierarchy of needs right now."

"Oh, talk dirty to me," he teases, and I laugh.

"See now, if that turns you on, we might have a real problem." Damn it, Vaughn. Don't flirt. We're mad.

But I can't help but think how adorable his blush is when his eyes meet mine through the phone screen. "Everything you say pretty much turns me on. I can't stop thinking about last weekend."

He's a little quieter now when he's talking about sex, but as great as the sex was, when I think about this last weekend, my mind goes to him shutting me down so fiercely.

"I can't wait to do it again this weekend."

I swallow hard, dread spreading through me as I clear my throat and reach back with my hand, gripping my neck. "Um... about that..."

His face falls. "What's the matter?"

You won't let me fucking love you and show the world how much I love you, I think but I don't say. "Nothing. I was just um, thinking..." Why is this so difficult? He didn't have any problem telling me how it was going to be when I wanted to take him as my date to the party. He shut it down quickly, and he keeps doing it.

I'm not stupid. I know he knows every time I'm about to tell him how much I love him, and he puts a stop to it. I do love him, but I can't put up with that forever. I want to be able to love who I love loudly. I get that he's scared—probably more for me than for himself—but I don't live my life that way.

He should know better. I face everything head-on. I don't hide, and I don't want to hide him like some sort of a shameful secret. What we have is beautiful. I'm not ashamed.

"What? You were thinking what?" he prods, and I can hear the worry and how his voice has gone to a higher pitch.

“I, uh... I think we should probably take the weekend off. You have to be tired of driving so far, and I don’t want you to fall behind at school. I know you said you have it under control, but I know how important school is to you.”

There. I said it. I got the words out. I watch his face as he processes what I just said, and I hate the worry I see there. The pain. “Oh.” I’m not strong enough for this. I just want to make it better. Make his face stop contorting in the anguish I see. “Okay. So I’ll stay here this weekend, and you’ll go to the party with your team. That’s good. Really good. Great.”

And now he’s rambling. Great. Just fan-fucking-tastic. I really upset him. “Just this one weekend. I’m sure you need to study.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Shit, are his eyes watering? Please tell me he’s not going to cry because of me. “You’re right. I probably should have been strong enough to stay away last weekend. This will be good.”

If he says good one more time, I’m going to scream. He’s obviously not good. I’m not either. I love that he showed up last weekend. That he couldn’t stay away. It was the best surprise of my life. But... he doesn’t want us to be a couple.

I know I need to stay firm, but I also hate the look on his face right now. “I’m glad you came here last weekend. I loved it.” Please just let me tell you how much I love you. I silently plead with him.

If he did, I’m pretty sure I’d be putty in his hands—hell, I already pretty much am, but I think I need the weekend. I need to go to the party by myself and maybe get used to the fact that Austin may never actually want there to be an us .

Maybe he just wanted someone he’s close to for discovering all these new things. Maybe he doesn’t really want to be a couple.

The bitterness squeezes my insides and actually physically hurts.

“Do you have a costume? For the party?” His voice sounds strained, and his face is showing how hard it is for him to ask.

I nod, trying to play it cool. “Yeah, it’s lame though.”

He smiles sadly into the camera. “What is it?”

“Eh, just a devil.”

He snorts. “You couldn’t pull off the devil if you tried. Didn’t they have anything else?”

My eyes narrow. “I can totally be the devil.” I try my best at an evil laugh, but it comes out a little squeaky and has him laughing at me, but he’s looking at me... The way he looks at me—I swear he loves me. Like he said he did.

Why is he so afraid to let me love him back?

“Okay well, I guess it’s good that you won’t be there to witness my humiliation.”

That seems to sober him up, and if he told me he wanted to go with me, or if he said he really wanted to see me this weekend, I know I’d give in because I really want to see him.

But all he offers is a sweet, sad smile. “Yeah, maybe it is.” The smile is forced. Not even close to his real smile I love so much. “But next weekend?”

We let the question hang there, and I hate how hopeful and scared he sounds when he asks.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later then. I gotta get to class.”

“Yeah, okay. Talk to you later.”

We hang up, and I lie back on my bed, notes forgotten.

I just want my boyfriend to be my damn boyfriend and let me tell him how much I love him. Is that really too much to ask?

23

AUSTIN

O h, this is stupid. So, so stupid. What the hell am I doing?

No big deal. Vaughn just flat-out told me he didn't want me to visit this weekend—that I should stay on my own campus and study while he went out and partied with his football friends.

So what the hell do I do? I go to the costume store and grab an angel costume to match his devil. That's totally smart, right? And now, I'm walking around campus, asking random strangers where the football team is tonight, dressed in all white with glitter makeup and a halo.

What. The. Hell?

I wasn't kidding about Vaughn making me dumber. But I couldn't help it. My heart sunk when he said he didn't want to get together this weekend. It felt like I was losing him for the first time in our lives. Even moving to different cities didn't feel quite that awful.

I hurt him. I know I did. Keeping him at bay like that when he's so certain he wants to announce we're a couple—it was a shitty thing to do. I was trying to protect my heart, but that wasn't fair to him.

People treat Vaughn like he's dumb—they always have—but he's not. He knows

what he wants and, for whatever reason, he wants to let everyone know we're together. Wanted. I don't actually know if he still feels that way.

I'd never seen him so resigned before—like I really, really destroyed him.

Finally, I track down the party that several people said most of the football team would be at. It's, of course, a bigass frat house with far too many drunk people just standing out on the lawn and spilling into the house. I search around for a devil costume outside but see none.

Okay, it may be possible that Vaughn isn't here. Hell, maybe he was here and wound up leaving with someone who actually deserves that big sweet man. I rub at my chest, the ache deep and painful—no, he wouldn't do that. Vaughn is fiercely loyal, and there's no way in hell he'd move on to someone else until he heard from me that I'm done.

And I'm not. I'll never be done with him.

I gather up all my courage and walk through the front door of the house, walking into loud music and some shouting as if they're playing some sort of game to my left. Someone bumps into me, spilling some beer. Fantastic.

But I don't see any devil costumes.

Not for a while. But just as I'm about to give up, that's when I see him. My Vaughn. His face, bare chest, and arms are painted red, and he's wearing tight black spandex pants that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination, all topped off with horns on his head.

He looks positively sinful, and that's even before he sees me. The sheer lust burning in his eyes as he looks me up and down, then crosses the room to come to me, is

enough to make me weak in the knees.

“Austin?”

“Hey . . . uh . . . thought you could use a little angel to your devil.”

He’s grinning now, and it should look ridiculous with the paint on his face, especially now that I see his eyebrows are painted black. “You came?”

“I’m sorry. I was an idiot. A real idiot.”

“That’s usually my job,” he jokes, but I growl.

“You’re not an idiot.”

He smirks. “You couldn’t stay away again, huh?”

I should be embarrassed by how needy he makes me, but I can’t find it in me to care.

“I never want to be away from you, Vaughn. I know I was an asshole last weekend. I was scared.”

He nods solemnly, crossing his big, bulging arms and making those veins that drive me crazy pop out, begging to be licked. “And you were afraid people would think we were together. But don’t you think they could guess when you’re looking at me like you want to eat me?” He waggles his eyebrows at me, and I shove him playfully.

He drops his arms, stumbling slightly but recovering fast. “Oh, I knew without a doubt if anyone saw us together, they’d know just how badly I want you. After years of hiding it, I don’t think I have it in me anymore.”

“I don’t want you to hide it. I like the way you look at me.”

“I know,” I say softly. “You’re way braver than I’ll ever be. But I don’t want to make your life any harder.”

“You don’t. If they can’t accept me, then I don’t want to be their friend. It’s as simple as that.” And the thing is, I know he means it. It really is that simple for him.

I take a deep breath. “Okay, introduce me to your friends then.”

His eyes light up. “Really?”

I nod. Even though I don’t feel sure about this at all, I need to trust Vaughn. He knows what he can handle, and I know he won’t ever lead me to harm. He doesn’t waste any time though.

He takes my hand and leads me over to a bunch of guys who are standing around, drinking and wearing costumes—big burly guys I’m almost certain have to be his teammates. They’re looking at us curiously.

Vaughn is smiling big though. “Miles. Jacob. John, this is my boyfriend, Austin.”

Okay, so I guess we’re just going to lead with that. My palm is sweating in his, but he doesn’t falter. He isn’t challenging them either. It’s like he’s not really asking for any sort of judgment. He’s just telling them how it is.

Jacob is the first one to speak, reaching his hand out for me. “Nice to meet you, Austin. Cool couples costume. My girlfriend wanted to do that, but we couldn’t agree, so she went to her sorority party instead.”

Miles snorts next to him and looks at me. “That’s because she can’t stand his ass but can’t quite cut the cord.”

“Fuck off,” Jacob says, but it seems lighthearted and fun.

Vaughn wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I instinctively lean into him. “Austin surprised me. I didn’t even know we’d be matching until I saw the angel in the room.”

“Gag, man. You’re one of those adorable couples, aren’t you?” John jokes, and they all laugh.

It’s like this huge weight is lifted off me. Maybe the world really has changed, or maybe it’s just because it’s college and it’s still people from all over, even if it’s more an agricultural, rural area. It still attracts all minds. But my guard remains up. There’ll be someone who will be a prick about it, there’s no doubt in my mind, and years of keeping watch for everyone around me doesn’t just go away.

We stand around and joke for quite a while, but it’s low-key and fun. Vaughn actually has to pull me away from the party to go back to his dorm, but when we get there, I’m done complaining.

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss his soft lips, uncaring that I’ll likely get my glitter all over him and I’ll be covered in red paint. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him being inside me, and I’m going to get it again.

“Thank you for coming,” he says breathlessly, trying to get my costume off.

I toss my halo to the other side of the room—won’t be needing that tonight. “Thank you for not being upset that I ignored your request for a weekend off.”

“You’re insane if you think that’s what I actually wanted.” He finally gets me naked, and I start working on his pants, which are practically glued to him and even tighter with his cock as hard as it is.

“I’m sorry. I know I messed up.” But he’s not even hearing it, he just kisses the hell out of me and spins me around so I’m flat against the door. The wood is cold on my bare skin, but I’m burning up as he kisses my shoulders and my back, his firm lips making a trail down my spine.

“For the record, I always want to see you. Even if I say I don’t want you to bother... or I’m trying to be brave and strong, I want to see you.” He kisses one side of my hip and then the other as his knees hit the ground behind me. I look over my shoulder, and he looks up at me, his gaze intense. “I want you.”

I tremble, my whole body shaking as his hands grasp my ass, and he pulls the cheeks apart. I should feel a little embarrassed, being on display for him, but I’m not. I trust him. One hundred percent. I lean my forehead against the cool wood of the door. “I want you too. Always.”

I know... I know I need to protect my heart, but he’s making it really damn hard right now. And not just my dick. Although, holy shit, I’m hard. I’m going to start begging soon, but I don’t have to because just as I’m about to turn around and beg him to fuck me, I feel the wet warmth of his tongue making its way down my crack and over my hole, swirling around it and making me gasp.

“Oh, holy shit.” My fingers try to grab at the small door, looking for purchase, but all I can do is stand there as he slicks up my hole with his tongue, licking and probing and making me whine and whimper.

I’m absolutely shameless as I ride his face, one hand reaching behind me to grip his hair and hold him in place. My cock is leaking as I hump against the door. “Close. So c-close.” I tremble and shudder.

He doesn’t let up, his tongue pushing inside me, stretching me out. When I can’t take it anymore, I reach my free hand between my body and get one stroke in, just enough

to take the edge off, but then his delicious mouth pulls away, and I nearly fall back.

“Nooooo. Don’t stop.”

He spins me around again, his hand grabbing the back of my neck as he slams his mouth to my lips and pulls me into a bone-melting kiss. I melt into him, and I must have missed when he finished getting naked because his hard cock drags against mine as he devours my mouth.

“Mine,” he says, wrapping a hand around us both. It’s so good. So damn good, I swear my eyes cross at the incredible friction, his big hand sliding over our cocks as they glide together.

He brings me to the brink again, but then the bastard stops. Again. “Vaaaaughn,” I whine with not even a hint of shame. “Please. I need you.”

“You’ll have me,” he says, walking over to the bed and grabbing the lube.

“Oh, yes,” I say, licking my lips and watching as he slicks up his cock with a generous amount of lube. He tosses the bottle and walks toward me, that confident glide I’m so used to with him.

“Come. Here,” he says before he grabs me, With impressive strength, he lifts me up, his hands bracing my ass as I wrap around him and hold on for dear life. The movement startles me, but I quickly catch on to what he has planned, and I’m all for it. He uses the door to brace some of my weight as he adds one finger and then two, stretching my already relaxed hole to take him, and then deftly replaces them with his cock.

We both groan as I use all the leverage I can muster to take him fully inside me. “Yes.” I cling to him, closing my eyes and feeling like all is right with the world

while he's inside me. While we're connected like this.

I kiss his neck and his shoulders, pretty much everywhere I can reach as I ride him, and he thrusts up into me over and over again. My body is already strung tight, and it's not going to take much, but when he shifts just slightly and hits my prostate dead-on, once, twice, and then three times, it's all over for me.

I cry out against the skin of his neck as spurt after spurt of warm cum splashes between us. It's not long after that, that he goes over too, my ass squeezing him hard while he empties inside me.

I will never tire of this feeling.

I know tonight was a big step—him coming out to his teammates, and he didn't even hesitate. I'm starting to desperately want to believe this can be more than a rebound.

That maybe, just maybe, Vaughn is my happily ever after.

But in order to get that, I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to be braver than I've ever been before, and I just don't know if I can allow myself to do it.

24

VAUGHN

So I have a boyfriend now, and I fucking love it. I still can't believe Austin showed up like that on Halloween, but it was one of the happiest moments of my life. Let's face it, I hated being mad at him and probably wasn't going to last that long anyway. But him showing up like that—and in a matching costume, no less—yeah, it showed me he really does love me.

That he wants to be with me, but he's scared.

And I get it, he spent a lot of his life terrified of people around him finding out his biggest secret, but I'm here to show him I'll always have his back. If he'll let me, I'll always be there to watch out for him, to defend him, and to love him.

He just has to let me.

We've been together every weekend since Halloween, and I swear I've spent most of that time inside him. What can I say? My boyfriend is hot, and I can't get enough. No regrets here.

But now, we're driving very slowly, might I add, through the main street of our hometown. We're back in Big Bend for Thanksgiving. It's Wednesday evening. He came to my school yesterday and stayed the night at my dorm. We drove the rest of the way together today.

His mom isn't expecting him until tomorrow, so we just go straight to my house, but the plan isn't to stay there. My mom, dad, and sister all hug us both, but my mom isn't thrilled to hear that we aren't staying.

"You boys cannot sleep in a tent tonight. It's November."

"It's November in Kansas," I say as I grab the tent from the garage, Austin following along. I hope he doesn't look my mom in the eye. He'll totally cave. I just know it. He's a sucker for my mom's sad face. "It was almost eighty degrees today."

"And it snowed on Thanksgiving last year," my mom pouts, her hand on her hip. And yeah, okay—shit, I looked her in the eyes, and I may be a sucker too.

"Hence, why we didn't camp out last winter." I try to offer her my most charming smile, but she's a mom and totally doesn't fall for it.

"Vaughn Christian Montgomery, I haven't seen your face since September."

"I know it's a cute face, Mom." I put the tent in my truck and turn around to face her, trying not to look into those mom eyes. "But I promise you'll see this face tomorrow and the next day."

"You'll be totally sick of that face by Saturday, I promise," Austin adds, and I smirk over at him.

My mom doesn't look too pleased, but when my dad wraps a secure arm around her, she kind of melts into his side and sighs. "Fine. Stay safe. And if you get too cold, come home."

"Promise." I kiss her cheek and hug Dad while Austin does the same and then hops back in the truck.

I take off toward our usual spot, Austin's hand on my thigh. This break is going to suck, not being able to touch as much—although, if it were up to me, it wouldn't be a problem.

I park the truck, and we get the tent set up, making a fire, but not wasting time before climbing into the tent together. I zipped our sleeping bags together, so we'll have more room, and no way in hell am I sleeping in a different sleeping bag than him.

I kiss him hard, already working on his clothes, and he chuckles against my lips. "What, no s'mores first? No wining and dining, now that we're boyfriends?"

I pull his shirt off over his head and kiss his smart mouth. "After. I need you."

His teasing smirk leaves his mouth now, and all I see is blind lust. "Okay. Yeah. I want that too."

I laugh as he pulls my shirt off, his hands roaming all over my bare skin. I love feeling his hands on me. And for the millionth time, I want to tell him how much I love him, but I hold back because I don't want to ruin the moment. How messed up is that?

"I thought we could change it up tonight."

He pulls back a little from licking down my chest, and I groan softly at the loss. I always want his mouth on me. He looks slightly concerned as he looks up at me. "What do you have in mind?"

"I thought maybe you could get inside me for once."

His eyes widen, clearly surprised, which makes me fidget a little. I'm lying flat on my back with him between my legs, and he sits back on his heels. "You want that?"

Shit. Does he not want that? Truth be told, I'm not sure it's something I'll like, but he's played around a little with my hole when he's blowing me. He hasn't pushed fully inside, and I can't say it's totally mind-blowing—but I think it could be. "I mean... only if you want to."

He's watching me carefully now, his hands resting on my lower stomach, and I wonder if he can feel how nervous I am. "Vaughn, I want everything with you. You know that. But this isn't a deal-breaker for me. I love bottoming. If you don't want this, I'm fine with it. More than fine. But if it's something you want to try, I'm more than willing."

My eyes drop to the bulge in his jeans, and then I look back up at him, almost losing my nerve. "You mean that? If I don't like it, you wouldn't feel like you're missing out on something?"

His smile is sweet and kind. Patient, like it always is. "Everything with you is a gift. Don't you know that? You have to know that."

I light up from his praise. I can't help it. And I know I can trust him with this like I couldn't trust anyone else. He'll take care of me, and he won't make me feel bad if I can't do it. I look into his eyes, my body trembling from nerves and excitement. "I want to try."

His hand smooths over my chest and up to my heart, where he lets it rest, his gaze intense as if he's reading every single thought—and knowing him, he is. "If at any minute you want to stop, we stop. You have to tell me, Vaughn. Promise me."

"I promise," I say easily because again—trust. Total and absolute trust. This is what I always thought love was. No doubts. When it comes to him, I know he's my person, the one I can always go to. He's the love of my life.

He takes his time now, stripping me out of the rest of my clothes and does the same for himself, leaving us both blissfully naked with a roaring fire just outside the tent.

It's chilly, but not cold, and when he starts to kiss every inch of my body, I don't feel even the slightest chill. My entire body is boneless and on fire as he worships every bit of me. By the time he grabs the lube from my overnight bag, I'm begging him to get inside me.

Of course, he ignores me. Teasing the hell out of me while he circles my rim with his lubed fingers while taking my cock into the back of his throat. He's really mastered deep-throating lately, and I'm a fan. When he pushes one finger inside me, it feels a little strange, but there's no pain.

The pain comes when he adds a second, but it's brief and gives way to my desperate need to have all of him. He's slow and patient with my body, giving me time to adjust, and when he finally deems me ready, he removes his fingers and climbs between my spread legs.

He lubes his cock and then surprises me when he reaches behind himself, obviously playing with his hole, though I don't have a good view from here. I drag my hand down his chest and wrap it around his cock, stroking him once. "I thought you were going to fuck me."

His head is tilted back, his eyes closed as he fucks himself on his fingers, his cock thrusting into my hand as he pants and gets lost in his own pleasure. It's a sight to behold, and if I wasn't so desperate to have him inside me, I'd gladly sit back and watch the show.

His eyes open, and his head lolls forward to look at me. Both his hands move to my hips as he leans forward and steals into my mouth. He kisses me like he owns me, and I can't get enough. When he stops kissing me, he remains near my mouth. "I'm

definitely going to fuck you, but I thought when I finish, if you hold off, you can come inside me.”

My cock twitches, thinking about being inside his tight hole. “Yes. That. Let’s do that.” I’m a bumbling fool, but no part of me cares.

He chuckles, but finally he’s positioning his lubed cock at my entrance as he grabs more lube and adds it to my cock, stroking me a couple of times until I bat his hand away and pant, “No. No way. I’m not coming until I get inside you, and if you keep doing that, it’ll ruin everything.”

He laughs and kisses me hard again. “You’re so dramatic.”

“Uh-huh.” I don’t even argue, just use my hands to grip his ass and pull him to me, his cock pressing against my hole.

“Just breathe for me and let me in,” he says, confident and strong.

I do as he says and focus on breathing while he eases inside me. Before I know it, he’s fully seated, and I’m stretched wide open for him. It doesn’t hurt. It’s a little uncomfortable, but I’m grateful he took so much time getting me ready.

I grip his firm ass as he strokes into me, taking his time and hitting that spot that makes everything go white.

“Austin. Fuck. Hurry,” I whine because if he does that anymore, I’m going to lose it.

He pushes into me again, my fingers digging into his flesh, and then his head falls back. All the chords in his neck pull tight, and his cock jerks inside me, and I feel the warm heat of his cum splashing my inner walls.

I barely let him come down before he pulls gently out, and I nudge him to all fours and climb behind him. “Do it. Get inside me,” he bosses, and I push into him with one solid stroke, his body opening for me. “Yesssss.”

“God, it’s like you were made for me,” I say as I grip one hip and one of his shoulders, shoving into him over and over, lost in pleasure.

“I was,” he says, pushing back against each thrust.

It doesn’t take long for me to come inside him, and we collapse into a sweaty, sticky pile on top of the sleeping bags.

“Damn.” I can’t help but laugh as he crawls out from under me and lies down next to my side, curled into me where he belongs.

“What’s so funny?”

“We’re idiots.”

He looks even more perplexed now. “What do you mean?”

“We could have been doing that the whole time.”

That makes him chuckle now, and he leans over and kisses my cheek. “I liked just cuddling too.”

I hold him close to me, relishing in all his warm bare skin and kiss his temple. “Yeah. Me too. I’m a total cuddle slut.”

“Oh, I know,” he says teasingly, but it’s fond.

We get cleaned up and then crawl under the sleeping bag, his head on my chest as I run my hand over his back. “Have you thought about telling your parents about us?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I think they’d be totally fine, but I mean...”

“What?” I ask, pushing his hair out of his face. “You’re worried about me?” Because if telling my teammates didn’t prove to him I’m all-in, I’m really not sure what will.

“They’re your parents, Vaughn. Their opinion matters.”

“Not if they don’t support us, it doesn’t.”

He frowns, his lips thinning, and I feel like we’re about to fight. “You love them. Not everything is so easy and black and white. I don’t want you to lose them because of me.”

So, he’s worried about me. Of course he is. “I think they know how much I lo—” He tenses, and I change what I was going to say. “How much I care about you. If they love me, they’ll support me.”

“They do love you.”

I smile and kiss his temple. “Then it’ll be fine.”

I know it bothers him that I just take things as they come, but I can’t worry too much about other people’s opinions.

Not even my own family’s. That’s just not me.

Tonight is supposed to be much cooler, and if we don’t stay at our houses, our moms might riot. So we clean up the tent and campsite the next morning before I drop

Austin at his house.

I'll see him soon at my house, along with the rest of his family. I have to make a quick stop at the town's bakery to pick up a couple of pies my mom ordered. I look around at a sea of familiar faces and am greeted by so many people I grew up knowing.

Some who know me from school, some who know my parents. Hell, even some who know my grandparents. It feels nice being back here like this, but I can't lie... lately college has started to feel more familiar.

The same people are usually working at the student union and at my favorite coffee place. I see familiar faces on campus. It's starting to become more like home for me.

"Well, well. If it isn't Vaughn Montgomery."

I chuckle when I see Benny walk in through the door as I wait for my order. Charlene—the bakery owner takes orders to be picked up every Thanksgiving morning and then shuts down for the rest of the week, so lots of people are scrambling to pick up their orders. "Benny McBride. What the hell are you doing in town?"

"You know I live here," he says, that infectious smile on his face. "The question is what are you doing here?"

"Picking up a pie for Thanksgiving."

Benny is grinning from ear to ear. It's clear he hasn't changed much. The guy is always happy. "Don't tell anyone, but that's what I'm doing too." He says it in a loud whisper, and I laugh.

“You taking credit for it?”

He laughs. “Nope, but my mom is. As if my grandma doesn’t know she doesn’t bake them herself at Thanksgiving.”

“Hey, gotta support small businesses.”

He bobs his head. “Exactly.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “So how have you been?”

I should probably talk about football or college, but for whatever reason, when I open my mouth, it’s to blurt out, “In love. Completely and totally in love.”

He cocks his head to the side curiously. “I heard you and Van broke up...”

Of course he did. Damn, small towns really never change. “We did,” I confirm—kind of sad that I haven’t talked to Vanessa since we broke up. Maybe I should call her sometime—tell her that she was 100 percent right to break up with me. “It’s not her I’m in love with.” I keep my voice fairly low because of the busybodies who are posted everywhere inside the small bakery. “It’s not a her at all.”

His eyes widen, and the surprise is shining there, but he’s grinning even wider now. “Austin?”

I look around carefully, seeing no one is paying attention to me, but when I meet Benny’s eyes, I nod. “How did you know?”

He snorts dismissively. “How did you not know?”

I laugh. “Touché. Did everyone know?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t think so. And I didn’t know know. I just assumed. I saw how much you loved him but wasn’t sure if you’d ever get it together and just love him out loud.”

I chuckle at that, but my chest kind of aches, thinking about it. “I would.” I look into his eyes, I guess kind of relieved to have someone to talk to, even if it’s not at the most opportune time. “If he’d let me.”

His mouth is in a straight line now, as if he’s thinking it over really hard. “Ah, yeah, I had one of those.”

I grin. “How is Rowan?”

“Totally in loooooove,” he sings. “With me,” he says as if I didn’t pick up on that.

“Never change, Benny,” I say, slapping him on the shoulder.

“Look.” He gets semi-serious on me. “Sometimes you just have to wait these grumpy men out. Show them how good it can feel to be in love around everyone else. To not care so much about ignorant assholes, but mostly, you just have to show them you aren’t going there.”

I think that over. Surely he knows that, but maybe he doesn’t. We did get together pretty soon after Vanessa broke up with me. Maybe he thinks this thing isn’t permanent.

That thought breaks my damn heart because it’s forever for me.

I grab my order, and Benny grabs his before we walk out toward our cars. “Thanks, Benny.”

“Good luck, Vaughn.”

He salutes me, and I wave, heading to my car and ready to drive straight to my man.

I have to show him this is it for me and hope like hell he knows, without a doubt, I’m not going anywhere.

25

AUSTIN

“Y ou okay, sweetie?” my mom asks as I look toward the front door at Vaughn’s parent’s house for the fiftieth time. I need to chill out, but it’s like a limb is missing. Which is so not a good thing when I’m keeping something from my parents like this.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” I say, but I can sense her worry, and I know I should cool it.

“How is school?”

I smile at her now because school is great, even though I’m starting to think maybe I chose the wrong one. I was so afraid that going to State would hold me back, but now it kind of feels like choosing KU is holding me back from being with Vaughn. Which is crazy and confusing.

I know it’s probably not going to last—I mean our own parents don’t even know, for Christ’s sake—but I could have been with him every day. If it’s going to end anyway, shouldn’t I try to get every second I can?

The thought of it ending at all makes my gut sink though. I never thought this would be possible. I thought going to KU could be a distraction from the pain—that maybe I’d meet someone I liked even half as much as Vaughn—but I think I was lying to myself.

“It’s good,” I answer vaguely.

But she doesn't get to ask another question because the front door opens, and in comes Vaughn, a great big smile and three pies in his hands. His dad rushes over to take two, and he puts one on the counter. His eyes find me, and even before he does it, I know what's going to happen. I could stop it—maybe—but I freeze as he walks over, takes my face in his hands and kisses the hell out of me.

I get lost in it for a moment, the rest of the room disappearing. My grandparents are here, so are his, along with his sister, his parents and mine, but they're in the back of my mind right now as Vaughn feasts on my lips.

I grab his biceps and hold onto him instead of pushing him away, and it's only when I hear a throat clearing that I jolt back. Vaughn looks just as stunned as I do, and when I look around at all the faces watching us, it's clear we aren't the only ones.

"You have something to tell us?" my mom asks, her arms folded, but she doesn't look mad. Or even that shocked.

I look over at my mom, my mouth gaping open and then closing, then turn to Vaughn. "Oh shit," he says. "I, um..." He looks panicked now—and this is what I mean by him not being afraid of anything. He just acts without thinking, and he looks like he's going to puke now. "Shit, Austin. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to out you. I swear... I didn't plan to do that."

Oh. Ohhhhh ... He's worried about me. Not him.

My mother, God bless her, actually chuckles at that. "Honey, I think Austin was already out."

I turn to her now. "What?"

She raises one stern eyebrow at me. "Really? You're going to play it that way? I hear

you had a pretty big coming out.”

Okay, what the hell? She knew about that? “You didn’t say anything?”

She waves me off and shares a smile with my father—who’s looking pretty smug. “Honey, a mother knows her son. I had an idea about it before the gossip in town started. Do you really think it matters to us?”

My dad gives me an easy, reassuring smile. “It doesn’t.”

“You didn’t say anything,” I say again, struck dumb.

I feel Vaughn at my side, standing there in solidarity, as if he’s not totally sure what he should be doing right now.

“We thought we’d wait until you were ready to tell us.”

I can’t help but laugh at that, feeling an odd sense of freedom I didn’t know I wasn’t feeling before. I don’t know why I didn’t tell them yet, but now that I know they know—I just feel lighter. “So, you both know.”

“That you’re... gay? Is that how you identify? Because I’ve read that you’re the only one who gets to define that, and I shouldn’t listen to nosey assholes in town on that one.”

I snicker. “You cursed.” She just waits for me to answer. “Yes. I’m gay.”

She smiles and walks into me, hugging me close. “Okay, then.” She turns to Vaughn. “And you, sweetie?”

Vaughn looks around the room, and I’m fully prepared to give him an out. Maybe I

can say he hit his head or something. Or maybe he did it to protect me somehow? They'd probably all buy that.

"I'm not gay," he says carefully, and I let out a deep breath. That's okay. He's not ready, and like my mom said, it's up to him to decide when and if he wants to come out. "But I..." He watches me carefully. "We're together." His eyes land on his own mother, who I can't really read. "I'm happier than I've ever been. I didn't plan to kiss him in front of everyone because I didn't want to out him, but I want everyone to know he's mine."

Face. Palm. He cannot act so possessive, right here in front of everyone, because it does things to me. Holy shit, he's not afraid at all. He wants everyone to know about us. He just totally told everyone.

He's in this. Truly in this. It's not a rebound. Or a phase. Or loneliness. Holy. Shit. Vaughn actually loves me back.

I stand there, frozen stupid, worried about what his parents are going to say. What if they can't accept us?

"You two are together? As in you're dating?" his mom asks, and Vaughn nods his head firmly.

"Yes. He's not just my best friend but also my boyfriend." His shoulders are squared, and his chin is lifted like he's prepared for a fight.

"Huh," his mom says, thinking it over. "Okay then."

We both startle, and Vaughn steps closer to her. "You're fine with that?"

His mom gives him an irritated look. "It's not something I get to be fine or not fine

with, Vaughn. As long as you're happy, I'm happy. That's all any parent wants for their kid."

"Any good parent," my mom adds.

Vaughn's mom seems to agree. "I just didn't know you two were dating. What about Vanessa?"

"We broke up. I didn't cheat," he says, and she nods.

"Good. She's a sweet girl..." His mother looks over at me with a warm smile. I realize maybe I wasn't breathing normally because I let out a full breath of air when she does. "And your boyfriend is a very sweet boy."

I grin at that, and Vaughn wraps his arm around me, hugging me close. "The sweetest."

"What about football?" Vaughn's dad chimes in, and I can see Vaughn's mom is about to scold him, but Vaughn holds up one hand to stop her.

"What about it? I'm still on the team, even though we didn't make it to a bowl game this year. I'll be back and ready next year."

His dad is hard to read, looking pretty stern, even as he nods. "People are going to be assholes about this. Are you boys ready for that?"

Vaughn squeezes me tighter to him. "I'm ready for anything. Most of my team knows anyway."

His father looks surprised, but then we finally see a hint of a smile on his lips. "Okay then. You just let me know if you need any backup."

We all chuckle at that before settling down at the table with grandparents and family, all seemingly either unsurprised or unbothered. It's a nice feeling.

Vaughn leans into me after scooping potatoes onto my plate and passing it on. "I'm sorry. I really didn't plan that."

I chuckle and look at him. "I know. It's okay. I think the only one you actually outed was yourself."

"Totally fine with that," he says with a bright smile, and I know, without a doubt, he means it.

My brave beautiful man who isn't afraid of anything. I could learn a lot from him, it turns out. I think everyone could.

26

AUSTIN

“ I t’s too cold out here,” I complain. It’s actually snowing on our heads. Fat snowflakes fall down as we all stand out here, just taking it.

Vaughn wraps his big arms around me, and okay, I suddenly feel a little warmer. “Since when are you such a wuss?”

I laugh and shove him away, but then immediately pull him back to me because you know—body heat. “Since forever, when it’s cold. I hate winter. You know this about me.”

He nuzzles into my neck and kisses me softly there. “It’ll be worth it.”

I think he overestimates how much I care about Christmas and lights for the holiday. I mean, yes, his dad’s display is really pretty every year, but still... it’s cold out here, and I’m freezing my balls off.

“You two are gross,” his sister complains, but she’s smiling. She’s been a total Vaughn and Austin supporter since Thanksgiving, though she claims she always knew about us, even before we did. Which, yeah, maybe she did. Apparently, no one was all that surprised.

Finally, his whole family and mine do a countdown, and his dad plugs in the damn lights, illuminating their house and front yard. We all cheer, and Vaughn’s mom and I

are the first ones to head back inside.

His family welcomed me as Vaughn's boyfriend just as easily as they welcomed me as his best friend. There hasn't been any weirdness. We're officially on winter break and have been bouncing back and forth between our two houses since then, never spending a night apart. So pretty much, nothing has changed.

Except, you know ... the sex. We have to keep it down though, and I'm already thinking about renting a place next year instead of staying in the dorms and maybe even changing cities.

I haven't brought it up to Vaughn yet. Things have been going so well, I don't want to fight with him, even if it's technically fighting for us. It's been on my mind constantly though.

He hasn't tried to tell me he's in love with me again since Thanksgiving break, and it does have me slightly worried. He told his family and mine about us, so he's in, but maybe I messed up the whole I love you thing so badly, he'll never say the words out loud again.

I hope not.

I find myself desperate to hear them and to not silence him ever again. I guess I'm going to have to earn that though.

We have hot chocolate with his family and then drive back to my parents' house to sleep. When we're all settled in the bed, he starts to kiss me, but I can still hear my parents in the other room, so clothes stay on.

For now.

“Thanks for coming home with me for Christmas.”

I smile as I let him hold me the way he has for so long, making me feel warm and safe. I guess I’m a cuddle slut too. “It’s my home too, Vaughn.”

I chance a look at his face and see he looks content, smiling at me. “So is college. I think anywhere we’re together will be home.”

See, he says things like that. How can I not love him? “Hey, Vaughn?”

His eyes have drifted closed, and he sounds sleepy, but he still answers me. “Yeah? What’s wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing.” I can hear the smile in my own voice, and sure enough, the smile on my face is so big, it almost hurts. He opens his eyes and looks at me. “I’m in love with you. I love you.”

His whole body tenses, and I can feel the nervous shift of energy as he rolls to his side to face me. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah. I love you so much.”

My heart is in my throat as I wait for him to pick up on my not-too-subtle hint. I need to hear him say it. I crave it. Please tell me I haven’t totally messed this part up for us.

He blinks and then licks his lips as he stares at me, uncertainty on his beautiful face. But he doesn’t say anything. My stomach drops, but this is Vaughn. It’s worth making a fool out of myself. I need to be brave, just like him. Even if it’s only in this exact moment and never again.

“Vaughn?”

“Yeah?” His voice sounds strained, and I hate that he’s afraid right now. That I made such a brave, sure man terrified of telling me he loves me.

“Say it.”

His eyes widen now, and his eyes search mine. “Really?”

I smile at him and nod. “Please.”

He cups my face in his big hand and smiles—great big and sure. “I’m so damn in love with you, Austin Pierce. I have been for a long, long time.”

I swear a tear falls out of my eye and down my cheek—I couldn’t stop it if I tried—and he uses his thumb to wipe it away, holding my gaze. “I love you too. I’m sorry I was scared. I thought you were just trying to say it to make me feel better about being in love with you.”

He laughs at that and shakes his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“That’s your job,” I tease, using his frequent line, and he presses a kiss to my lips.

“Yeah. Yeah it is.” He kisses me harder, and I kiss him back, getting lost in the moment when he tucks my body under his, threading his fingers through my hair. He looks down and into my eyes. “Never forget how much I love you and never be that ridiculous ever again.”

“Never stop telling me how much you love me,” I say as I bring him back down to me, pressing my lips to his and holding him there.

“That will never ever happen. You thought I was a cuddler before, now you’re my boyfriend who I get to loooooove all loud and shit. All the time.”

“You really are ridiculous.”

I can feel him smiling into the kiss, and I smile too.

Finally, everything feels right, and no matter what comes at us, we’re going to go through it together.

27

VAUGHN

“S o is the boyfriend coming tonight?”

“That’s kind of personal, isn’t it?” I tease Jacob, who takes a minute to catch up and then shoves me.

“Not what I was asking.”

I laugh happily, walking between classes with him. We had our last class together and also have our next one together. He’s become a pretty good friend, so I was more than happy to have two classes with him this semester. “Yeah. He should be here when I get back to the dorm.”

“You should see your face right now, man.”

“What’s it doing?” I grin even wider because I know exactly what he’s talking about. I’m happy. Really, really happy. When Austin told me to say it—to tell him out loud for the first time just how much I love him—I thought I was dreaming. Or that maybe it was a trap or something.

But he wasn’t kidding, and I was fully awake. And I’ve said it every single day since that one. And I miss him even more now than I did before.

This going to separate colleges sucks.

Jacob says something about next year and maybe being able to talk Austin into coming to a game or two, and I want to be excited about that. Get Jacob on my side and talk Austin into it, but really the thought leaves me a little sad. I don't know if I can deal with two different cities for another year. I want to be with him.

And I know he went to school to get some space from me and maybe clear his head, but now we're together. I want to actually be together.

I don't care that we're too dependent on each other. To me, that's just stupid. We're two people choosing to be together because we make each other happy. There's nothing wrong with that.

"Yeah, sure. Maybe," I answer Jacob in the most vague way, but he's already moved on to the next topic when we run into some more of our friends.

After class, Jacob is right by my side, along with John and his new girlfriend. "So do we get to hang out with Austin or are you going to hog him?"

I laugh. My friends are for sure using me for my boyfriend, and I honestly have no problem with it. Austin is pretty fond of them too.

"Ugh. I guess you guys can hang out for a bit, but then it's naked time and only a party for two."

They all laugh as we head to my dorm, my stomach full of excited butterflies. I just saw him this morning on a video chat and was with him last weekend, but I still can't get enough. I'm starting to suspect I'll never get enough.

But Austin isn't alone when we all reach my dorm. He's standing outside my door with Vanessa who pulls him into a teary hug. I watch them for a moment, a little afraid of what this means until they both turn to me.

Vanessa walks over to me carefully, and I feel bad that she's nervous. "Hey, Van."

Does she know about Austin and me? She must. But she doesn't look upset. She actually looks really happy with a hint of nerves. "Hey, how are you?"

She acknowledges my friends with a quick nod, but her attention is on me. I can feel Austin's cautious eyes on me, but he doesn't need to worry. "I'm good. You?"

"Good." She smiles back at Austin, then looks at me. "I hear you're really happy."

I look over at Austin, who shakes his head, holding his hands in front of him as if to say he didn't tell her.

Vanessa laughs. "Our moms are friends, and the whole town is full of little old gossips."

"Oh." I grin and then grip the back of my neck. "Is that..." I don't want to ask her if it's okay with her. It really doesn't matter, but I also don't want her to think I cheated on her. "I am really happy."

She's smiling brightly. "Good. I'm glad. I had no idea you were..." I wait for her to say gay, and my hackles rise because I'm not, and it's wrong to assume, but I should know Vanessa better than that. "In love with him."

"I didn't know it until after we broke up," I say quickly.

She smiles and hugs me. "I know that, Vaughn. I miss you." She pulls back and looks over at Austin. "I miss you both. As friends. We should catch up sometime."

"Well, we're going to hang out for a bit. You should join." Jacob shoots his shot, eyeing Vanessa up and down, and I smack him on the back of the head.

“She has a boyfriend.”

Vanessa just laughs. “Fiancé.”

“What?” I look at her, shocked, and she shrugs.

“When you know, you know, right?” There’s that nervous look again, and I laugh, hugging her again. Genuinely happy for her.

“Congrats.”

“Thanks.” She looks over at Jacob. “And thank you for the invite, but I have to get going. I’ll see you all around.”

Austin comes to my side, and I pull him into me, everyone else forgotten because I’m finally touching him again. “Take care of yourself, Vanessa.” She waves to him, and then we all go inside.

I pull Austin onto my lap instantly, and my friends groan, but they’re good sports. We have a good time, catching up and hanging out, but I’m still happy as hell when they each dip out and finally Austin and I are alone.

When Jacob leaves the room with a click of my door, Austin turns around in my lap and kisses me hard. I hold onto his hips and just breathe him in, my world settled with him here with me.

I start to pull his shirt up, but his hands stop me, and he chuckles. “Wait. I actually want to talk to you first.”

I kiss along his neck, meaning to use words and give him some distance between our bodies, but my hands wind up under his shirt and over his smooth bare back. Oops.

“Vaughn,” he laughs. “Seriously.” But he tilts his head to the side and gives me better access to his neck. I lick along one of the chords there, and he moans, grinding his hardening cock against mine. “I had a meeting today.”

“What?” I pull back and look at him, trying to catch my breath. “Are you okay?”

He smiles and shakes his head at me. “Forever my biggest protector.”

“Always,” I growl, my fingers digging into his hips even more as I sit here and worry about all the things he could have had a meeting about.

“Relax.” His hand smooths over my chest. “I talked to my counselor about how difficult it would be to change schools.”

It takes a minute for my mind to catch up, and I stare at him in shock. “What? You want to come here?”

He nods. “I do. It wouldn’t be this semester but next year. Turns out, it won’t be all that difficult. Pretty easy to switch, actually, and I think I’m going to do it.”

I want to scream with joy. Jump up and do a totally dorky happy dance, but I stop myself. Dread washes over me. I can’t let him change his whole life just for me. I’ve thought about giving up football and changing schools.

It would suck, and I’m not sure my grades will allow it, but I was going to try because the thought of another year without him on the same campus was too awful to bear. But him doing this for me? When he was the one who wanted to go to separate schools in the first place...

“But you didn’t want to go to this school.”

“They have a great business program. I was being a snob.”

I don't want to let on just how excited I am because I need to know for sure he's doing this for the right reason. Love isn't selfish. I don't know a lot of things, but I know that one.

“We could make long distance work until you graduate.” I would hate it, but we could do it. I'd do anything for him.

His hand brushes over my cheek, and he's looking at me so fondly, my heart nearly cracks in half. “I don't want distance from you, Vaughn. Not ever again. I was fooling myself. Desperately and pathetically in love with my best friend. I would have been, no matter where I moved to. It wasn't going to just go away.”

“I'm glad it didn't,” I say honestly, and he smiles, kissing my lips softly and then pulling back.

“Me too. I was an idiot. I was wrong, and I want to make it right.”

“You aren't worried we're too codependent?” I can hear our moms now, telling us to really think about it and telling us how young we are. That changing our lives for each other is reckless.

“Oh, we're totally codependent, but I'm tired of not going after what I want. I thought for so long that Big Bend was the problem. That if I could get out of there, I'd be braver. Then it was State that was going to hold me back, but the truth is, I was just scared. You make me brave.”

“You're brave all on your own. It has nothing to do with me.” I shake my head. “You went to a college where you knew no one, and you thrived. I don't want you to leave it. You love it.”

“I love you.” He says it so firmly, I feel it everywhere. The words still make me tingle with happiness.

“I love you too, but you never have to give anything up for me. I’ll make it work however I need to.”

“You don’t need to. I want to do this. I’m filing the paperwork to transfer next week. My mind is made up. I just needed to hear that you love me one more time before I did.”

I laugh and then flip us, so his body is under mine and I’m hovering over him. “I love you.” I kiss him. “I love you.” I kiss down his neck. “I love you forever, no matter what city we’re in.”

He laughs and holds onto my bicep. “I love you too. I’m thinking about renting my own place here next year.”

My eyes light up. “Tell me you want a roommate.”

He laughs. “Pretty sure you have to live in the dorms if you’re playing football, and you better be playing.”

“Coach did talk about me starting next year.”

I can see he’s truly happy for me. “But I suppose you can stay the night at my place sometimes.”

“All the time,” I say as if I’m compromising.

He cackles at that until I lean down and kiss him stupid.

Next year, I'm going to have it all. Football. College. And my best friend in the world by my side.

I can't wait.

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AUSTIN

I hop into Vaughn's arms, being totally dramatic and carefree—which is so unlike me, but I really couldn't care less that there are a lot of people around us right now.

I packed up my dorm this morning, and after my last final, I drove here to find him after the last final of his freshman year.

It's summer. And if either of us has anything to say about it, we won't be spending another day apart. I'm officially no longer a student at KU and now a student at State, right where I belong. I don't regret the year I spent there, but I also don't regret my decision to leave either. I'm not missing anything there. I have everything I need here, along with the memories of that school.

He kisses me as I wrap my arms and legs around him, kissing him back and ignoring the hooting and hollering around us. My heart is full, and I'm happy. Truly happy. I pull back from the kiss, grinning at him like a total fool. "Happy summer."

"Happy summer. You ready to go to our place?" He's way too excited, but I like it. A lot. Because same. I'm not sure I've ever described myself as giddy before, but that's definitely what I'm feeling right now.

I let myself slide down his body to the ground, taking his hand in mine. "I can't wait."

We could have gone back to Big Bend for the summer. I know that's what our parents—especially our moms—would have preferred, but neither one of us seemed

to be in a hurry to do that. Instead, we rented a little house off campus, and Vaughn got a job with the campus landscaping crew while I got a job at the library.

Our parents generously covered the first month's rent, but we'll get the rest. We say goodbye to our—yes, our mutual—friends and then haul ass out to grab his truck and mine, driving the couple of blocks to our new place.

We can invite them over later—maybe. I know Jacob plans to go home for the summer, but John is staying here, so we'll probably see him. It's crazy to me how fond I am of Vaughn's jock friends. Letting that judgment of jocks go has been a little eye-opening for me. I try not to judge anyone anymore. We've seen Vanessa and her new fiancé a couple of times since she showed up at Vaughn's dorm to confirm what her mother told her about us. She wasn't mad at all. She seemed kind of relieved to know that Vaughn was happy. You'd think it would be weird, but it's really not. I think Vanessa will always be one of our close friends.

We walk into our little blue house on the corner, and I look around, smiling. We don't have much yet, mostly just what we brought from the dorms, but when I go into the bedroom, I'm surprised to see a new mattress on the floor, still wrapped in plastic.

"They delivered it last night," Vaughn says from behind me into my ear.

"You didn't try it out?"

"Hell no." I turn around in his arms as I wrap mine around his neck. He sounds almost offended I would ask. "It wouldn't be right without you."

"You're such a sap, now that you're in love."

He pinches my ass. "I was always a sap, but maybe I was always a little in love."

“I’m so in love with you,” I say easily. “This is going to be great, except I’m not sure I can deal with your slobbish ways.”

He chuckles, holding my body to his. “We’ll figure it out.”

I kiss him, already nodding my head because I have no doubt we’ll work it out, no matter what comes at us. “We should really christen this place, don’t you think?”

I waggle my brows at him, and he laughs out loud before nodding his head and kissing me hard. Our clothes fly off, and it’s hilarious watching him try to pull the plastic off the mattress, fully naked and fully hard. But he gets it, and my body falls onto the mattress before I pull him on top of me.

“Lube,” I say breathlessly.

“Damn it. I guess we should have unpacked.” He starts to get up, but I can’t let him go. I hold him there, thrusting my hard cock against his.

“This works too.”

He groans into my ear, panting wildly as he reaches between us and strokes our hard cocks together. “Fine, but I’m getting inside this ass later.”

“Promises, promises,” I moan, arching up into him, the head of his cock catching against mine and making me see stars. My balls are aching to come, and I know I won’t last long.

“We live together now. I’m going to live inside you,” he says hoarsely, nipping and biting my bottom lip and down my jaw.

“Yes,” I barely manage to say because words are hard right now.

I wrap around him and thrust against him, chasing that high. His free hand moves under my ass, and he squeezes hard, setting me off, my cum spraying between us. He uses it to stroke himself until he comes, biting into my neck and likely leaving a mark.

I smile at the thought.

We lie like that for what feels like forever, not wanting to let go of one another.

“I love you, . I’m completely and totally in love with you.”

I lean into his ear, whispering, even though I don’t need to. “Thank you for loving me. I love you too.”

There’s no need to move right now. We’re both where we want to be.

In each other’s arms, where we belonged from the start. Maybe it just took being apart for me to gain some courage. Maybe I borrowed some of it from Vaughn.

It doesn’t really matter how we ended up here, just that we did. Starting our lives together and settling into our beautifully chaotic, codependent-as-hell future.

DEFENDER

OAKLEY

I climb out of my truck and grab the twelve-pack of beer I picked up after work. My body screams at me over the hard labor I put in today at my landscaping job, but it's the best kind of burn.

My muscles feel worn-out, and I'm still sweaty and dirty, but I'm happy. High school is over, and I miss playing football like crazy, but having my own job and my own place is more than enough to make up for it. I have money coming in and get in a good workout every day from working outside.

I'm parked in the driveway of my small two-bedroom rental house. But instead of going home, I head next door, busting through the front door, like I own the place. "Get ready to have some fun, fuckers! It's Friday night!"

"Easton, what the fuck?" Jameson Bates, my old teammate and former enemy, is currently straddling my best friend, Garrison Dixon, on their couch, their lips fused together. They aren't naked though—thank fuck.

Means they just got started and will likely have some killer blue balls, but they'll be fine. "It's Friday night! It's time to let loose."

"That was the plan," Garrison grumbles as Jameson climbs off his lap, shooting me a death glare.

“I brought beer.” I hold up the twelve-pack as Garrison walks to me, slugging me in the shoulder.

“You’re supposed to knock, dickhead.”

“That’s really not my style,” I say as I plop down on the couch and crack open a beer. Dixon and Bates moved in here a couple of months ago. My best friend is coupled-up and so goddamned happy and in love, it’s sickening.

It’s fucking great.

He came out during our last month of high school. Told the entire locker room he was gay without batting an eye. It was brave, and I admired him for it. Later. At first, it stung because he didn’t trust me enough to tell me before that, but we got through it. We’re closer than ever now.

Literally—because I got a job at the same landscaping place where he and his boyfriend work and moved in next door.

Garrison sits next to me and opens his own beer, taking a sip. “You hear about Coach?”

“What about him?” I ask worriedly because our football coach is a damn good guy. He kicked our asses out on the field, but we always knew he had our backs.

“Apparently, they gave him a new assistant coach.”

I frown at that. “So?”

“So, it’s Chance Leighton,” Jameson supplies as he tosses a bag of chips my way.

I catch it, but I'm fucking stunned. "He's a fucking Bear."

"We know," Garrison says as he takes my chips and grabs a handful. "Fucking unbelievable."

The Kensley Panthers have one rival. The Big Bend Bears. Motherfuckers, if you ask me. A bunch of entitled assholes whose asses we kicked up and down the field. And now they're forcing Coach to work with the kid who's barely older than us and was the assistant coach there?

"That's fucked up," I say, unable to believe it. "Poor Coach."

"So why are you here? And why the fuck are you stinking up our couch?" Jameson asks, taking a seat next to my best friend. I'm not bitter. I want Dixon to be happy, but I sometimes miss the days when it was just Dixon and me on Friday nights.

Laughing and partying after the games.

Okay, maybe I miss high school a little bit. They'll be having their first football game of the season soon. Maybe we can go back, just to check on the old town. I don't mention it now though. I'll bring it up later. "Because it's Friday night. We have to celebrate the weekend."

"We were going to celebrate in our own way," Jameson says, irritation clear in his voice, but he's not that pissed off. I used to really get on his nerves, but I'm pretty sure he's accepted that his boyfriend and I are a package deal.

"You guys can hump on the couch any day. We should start a bonfire in the backyard, get some of the guys to come over."

They both shift awkwardly on the couch, and I know it's because I mentioned guys

from the team. But really most of them are pretty cool. There were a couple who had a problem with two teammates fucking around, but they can fuck off.

Nobody needs them anyway.

“You’re not starting a fire in our backyard,” Garrison says, and I think it over, standing up with my beer in hand and walk to the patio door, looking out.

“You guys need a firepit. I’ve seen some pretty badass ones on Pinterest. We can totally do that.”

I turn to see them both staring at me with their eyebrows raised before Garrison laughs. “You’re on Pinterest?”

I shoot him the middle finger. “Fuck off. I’m always looking for new shit to do.”

They’re both laughing, but I don’t care. My mind is already plotting a firepit. It’ll be badass, and I can start this week after work.

“No parties, but how about we grill?” I roll my eyes but then give in because at least it’s something to do.

“Fine. I’ll go shower and then pick up some steaks.”

“Veggies too,” Jameson says as I put the beer down, not having had very much of it yet. “I’ll invite Travis.”

I groan out loud, and my best friend just chuckles. “Do we have to?” I whine like a child.

“Yes,” Jameson says, his phone already out. “And thank fuck you added shower to

that list. You reek.”

I flip him off again and grab my keys, heading over to my place without more of an argument.

Great. A night with Travis fucking Wyatt. The dude hates my guts, but if it’s the only way I get to hang out with my best friend, I’ll take it.

RED ZONE

DALLAS

I drag my ass out of bed and grumble all the way to the bathroom before taking care of business and heading back into my room, grabbing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and pulling them on, then covering my dirty blond hair with a blue baseball cap.

I look into the mirror above my dresser and decide that's good enough.

First day of my senior year of high school. Yay me.

I try like hell to push away the nerves and anxiety about what it'll be like walking the halls of Big Bend High School again. The summer was just too damn short.

The summer is always too damn short. I kept busy most of the summer though, working for an old farmer who didn't talk much at all and wasn't interested in gossip. Which, to be honest, is rare as hell in a town like Big Bend.

There's not much around here. Oilfields, cows, and football. That's all we have. So gossip is huge. When something juicy happens, like the school's football coach getting fired because he was accused of having an affair with a student—a male student—yeah, that's been the talk of the town.

It didn't matter that nothing had ever happened between Chance Leighton... and me. It didn't matter at all. It didn't matter that he was just a really good coach and had been my friend. All that mattered around here is that he'd been seen in a gay bar, that

my phone had a picture of him in that gay bar.

It got the town talking, all right. And it got him fired. His whole life was destroyed because of me and my idiocy. I hang my head, the weight of the world pounding down on my shoulders because even if Coach Leighton says he's okay, it doesn't matter. I ruined his reputation and mine by being a complete and total idiot.

"Dallas! Breakfast is ready! You can't be late for school!" I hear my mother yell, and I try like hell to push away all the memories. All the fear. Because none of it matters. I can't run away. I'm stuck here in this godforsaken town for another year until I finish high school.

What I'll do after that, I have no damn clue. I'll likely work on a farm or in the oilfield, like everyone else around here—just rotting away.

"Dallas Evan Boone! I'm not going to tell you again!" I hear my mother's shrill voice from downstairs.

Jesus fucking Christ. Is there anyone more pathetic than me? I'm eighteen years old, and I hightail it down the stairs like my ass is on fire because my mommy used my middle name.

The answer is no. There is no one more pathetic than me. Just in case you were wondering .

I make it down to the kitchen and see my dad already at the table, drinking coffee and picking at his bacon as my mom fusses around the kitchen. Neither of them looks at me, despite my mother hollering like a banshee for me to join them only moments ago.

It's not unusual. They'd rather I didn't exist, and yet they still can't do anything out

of the ordinary. We eat breakfast in near silence before I give my mother a kiss on the cheek, grab my keys and backpack, and head out of the house. I barely get the door closed before I run smack into the hardest body I've ever felt, and it takes everything in me not to stumble right onto my ass as I struggle to keep my balance.

I'm not a small guy by any means. Corn-fed farmboy built for football, but the man before me is built like a goddamn truck. His dark eyes remain on mine while I barely manage to recover.

I don't say anything, and neither does the stoic man before me. I study him far too closely. More than I should. But hell, I just got the wind knocked out of me. I'm gonna blame it on that.

He's tall—about two inches taller than my six foot two, at least, and his eyes are dark brown with so much anger and brutal suspicion, it nearly knocks me backward again. But his hard, square jaw, high cheekbones, and full red pouty lips pursed so damn tightly are my undoing.

I can't help sweeping my eyes down over his beautiful face to his highly muscled arms crossed over his broad chest. The man is seriously defined, but it's not like gym-rat defined—it's like hard work. There's no other way you get a body like that. Hours and hours of hard work, likely out in the sun, if his dark tan says anything.

I slowly drag my eyes back up to his, realizing with horror that I've been staring for far too long and I'm likely to get my ass knocked the hell out doing that. "Can I help you?" I ask him, feeling the need to stand up a little taller and flex my biceps as I fold my arms too, staring him down.

One thing about me, I'm damn used to defending myself, so I never back down. Not since...

Nope. Don't go there right now, Dallas.

"Yeah. You can get your ass in the truck," his deep voice growls, and I look back behind him where he gestures with his hand, seeing a shiny black new Dodge, still running.

I look back at the guy's face—a face I'm pretty sure will be burned into my memory no matter how short this interaction. I don't like that at all. I don't... I can't admit just how rattling this man's beautiful features are.

Thoughts like that get me into trouble.

You will act right, or you will not have a family, son. Do you understand me?

Shit. Shit. Shit. No. I try to push the memory of my father's words away and focus on the stranger. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Dallas, right?" he asks, and I nod in answer. "That's what I thought. Get in the truck," he demands again, and I just stay put, my arms still crossed.

Is this guy insane? "I don't know you."

"You don't have to. I know you. I know exactly what you are, and there's no way in hell I'm letting you get away with it." He drops his arms, and I stiffen as he steps closer to me. He knows what I am? Fears sweeps through me, but I don't move. I don't back away.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," I try weakly, my voice barely sounding like mine.

"Yeah, you do," he says, getting even closer, and I try like hell not to think about how

damn good he smells. So not the damn time, Dallas. Jesus. I am seriously screwed up.

“I really don’t,” I try. I don’t know this guy. Maybe Chance has a brother? Or a friend who’s come to take revenge? Hell, it could be just your run-of-the-mill homophobe, for all I know.

“Chloe,” he says, and now I’m really fucking confused. I just stare at him, dumbfounded by the name he just gave.

“I don’t know a Chloe.”

“Bullshit,” he says and gets into my face, his disdain for me palpable, but I don’t know why.

“I don’t.” This is so not good. The guy is seriously deranged.

“Let me help you out,” he says coolly. “Kensley. A little over a year ago, at a party out in the middle of nowhere. You and Chloe. Apparently, up against a tree.” His teeth are bared, and I notice his fists clenching.

My heart rate kicks up at the memory. Another idiotic mistake. So fucking stupid, I’ve pushed it to the back of my mind. I don’t want to think about that night, but how the hell does this total stranger know about it?

My eyes widen, and I drop my folded arms, taking one step back away from him, almost hitting the front door of my house. “Look, man. I didn’t know she had a boyfriend. I wouldn’t?—”

“Shut up,” he snaps, and holy shit, is this how I die? Really?

“Listen... you’re going to have to trust me on this. I’m not a threat, okay? Like not at

all.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “I was so drunk that night... there’s... I don’t think I even...”

“Shut. Up,” he says again slowly but making a point. I snap my mouth closed. “I’m not her boyfriend, asshole. I’m her brother.”

My eyes widen as I stare at him. I don’t even remember what she looks like. I was trying to prove something that night. All I did was make a total fool out of myself. “Look, man, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to disrespect your family, but I swear she... I mean...” Fuck, do I let him think that I fucked his sister against a tree at a party when I was so fucking drunk I could barely stand only because I’m just a young horny idiot? Or do I let him murder me slowly and painfully because I used his sister to fight things I still can’t face to this day?

Do I tell him I struggled to even get hard, let alone stay hard, and had to think about someone else in order to come? That I went home and climbed in the shower, crying like a damn baby afterward? That I’m just a fucking mess, and I have absolutely no interest in his sister, and he doesn’t have to worry about me staying away from her.

I look into his murderous gaze. Probably should do what he says and keep my mouth shut altogether.

Less is definitely more in this situation.

“I’m not getting into your truck, and I’m late for school, but I won’t go near your sister again,” I say when he remains silent.

I push past him and head toward my old beater truck that’s definitely seen better days and looks a little sad, especially parked next to his much newer and nicer one. But he grabs my arm to stop me before I get far.

“You’re going with me.”

“For what? I’m late for school,” I say dumbly as if it matters to this man.

“For a DNA test.”

My entire body locks up at that, and I stare at him. “What the hell are you talking about? For what?”

He lets go of my arm, his eyes hard and unforgiving. “Tell your brain to catch up,” he says cruelly, and I blink.

And I blink again as I stare at him, then shake my head. “Chloe is pregnant?”

“Nope,” he says, popping the p and stepping into me again. “Chloe has a four-month-old son, and you,”—his eyes remain locked on mine, sending my body on full alert, and I try to shift away from him in a way I hope is subtle because if this guy sees me sporting a boner right now, he’ll rip my head off for sure—“are the father.”

All traces of a boner are fully gone now as he says the words I couldn’t fully wrap my head around. “No, I’m not,” I say instantly. “There’s no way.”

“No?” he asks angrily. “So it wasn’t you? It was a different Dallas from Big Bend High that night?”

I start to open my mouth but then close it quickly, a sense of dread flowing through me. I was so damn drunk. It only lasted a few moments. There’s no fucking way. “I’m not the father. Did you even consider anyone else?”

“There was no one else.”

I don't point out that his little sister could have easily lied to him because I like my head where it is, even if it's never done me much good anyway.

"I'm late for school. I can't..." I shake my head, fighting heavy breathing. It feels like my chest might explode, but I keep walking until I get to my truck and yank open the door.

He's there in an instant, blocking me from closing the door when I climb into the cab. "You are Christian's father, whether you choose to hide from it or not." I look up into his dark eyes, not seeing so much hate there—hell, it looks a lot more like pity. And I don't know which is worse.

"I need to go," I say numbly, and thankfully, he moves out of the way, allowing me to close the door. I drive off down the dirt road, heading to school, dread settled deep in my belly.

I'm not a father.

I can't be.

SIMPLICITY

WALKER

I 'm in a good mood this morning. Although, it's hard not to be when you love your job, and man, do I love my job. I slam the door on my truck after I climb out and smooth out my dark orange Oakley's Crew polo before walking into the building to get my assignment for the day.

I pull open the door and am instantly greeted by familiar faces, all bustling around the shop and getting ready for the workday. I nod at Gabe, honestly surprised he's already here. The guy has a three-year-old and shares custody with his ex-wife, but I'm pretty sure he had her last night.

That kid is cute as hell, but man, she's a handful, so Gabe is usually late. "You're here early." I can't help but say it, and Gabe gives me the stink eye. Not a big talker, that one.

"Yeah. Amber woke up in the middle of the night and wanted her mom. So I took her over to Shelly's," he grumbles, pouring hot coffee from the communal pot into a thermos. Poor guy. I don't imagine he got much sleep.

"Sorry, man," I offer, and he just grumbles a thank-you, and I keep on walking into the main room where we wait for our daily assignments. I've worked for Oakley's Crew—the best landscaping business in the county—for almost two years now, so there's no jitters anymore.

Other than excitement. I love starting a new job, and since I finished up my last one on Friday, that's exactly what I'm getting today. I grin when I see Archie walk in, dark sunglasses covering his eyes as he plops down next to me. "Will you never learn?" I tease because we're thirty, and this guy parties like he's twenty. Alas, he's still my best friend, and we've known each other since grade school. The guy isn't ever going to change.

"Sorry. We can't all be tucked in with a book at nine, grandpa."

I roll my eyes at him and of course have to raise my middle finger in his face. "Fuck you. It was ten."

He grins and is probably about to tell me all about his wild night last night but doesn't get the chance before everyone else fills in the chairs at the table, and Oakley and Travis walk in. It's time to start work.

Oakley and Travis started this company a couple of months before I joined, and it's been successful as hell. Oakley is... unique. Let's go with that. Big, huge, muscly dude. Loved playing football in high school but had a total obsession with Pinterest and making the world beautiful, so he followed his passions and opened Oakley's Crew Landscaping with his boyfriend—now fiancé—Travis.

Travis is the quieter, more reserved one of the two, and he does most of the books and scheduling and shit. Things that would bore me to tears. But he's incredibly good at what he does. The business is a well-oiled machine, and they can barely keep up with demand.

Oakley has quite the reputation around here, and we often travel one or two hours away to do jobs for people who have heard about him. He's even had offers in other states but has turned them down, wanting to keep it local.

"All right, fuckers! Who's ready for another week?" Oakley is already pumped up,

and I'm not surprised at all. We all cheer like we're back in the high-school locker room because, let's be honest, we all played high-school football—there's not much else to do around western Kansas.

“Maybe we shouldn't call our employees fuckers ,” Travis deadpans, but Oakley is totally unbothered.

“Said with love, of course.” Oakley smacks a quick kiss on his lover's pouty mouth and then starts handing out assignments. I instantly check mine over with excitement and anticipation.

Hmm, country house about ten minutes out of town, so way out in the boonies. Wants a flower bed in front, a path from the driveway to the house, a path down to the garden, and possibly a hot tub. Big job. Yes.

I look at the part of the page that usually has a partner or partners assigned, but it looks like I'm on my own for this one.

“You good?” Oakley asks me, and I look up at him with a grin.

“Looks like fun to me. Solo job?”

“Yeah.” He looks around the room no one has left yet. “We're fully booked up and kind of stretched thin. We're looking to hire more people soon, but for now, there'll be a lot of solo jobs. If anyone is struggling with that, come talk to me, and we'll figure it out.”

I have no doubt he will. Oakley and Travis don't stay in the office all day. They're always out on a job when we are. Some of the hardest workers I've ever met, and I'm proud to be part of this crew.

Everyone agrees, and some start to head for their Oakley's Crew trucks as I glance at

my work page again, just skimming over some more of the details.

“What the hell kind of first name is Dutton?” I wonder aloud. Dutton Collins. Interesting.

“Really, Walker ?” Gabe emphasizes my first name, and I flip him off.

“Walker is a perfectly acceptable first name.”

“If you’re a Texas Ranger,” Archie quips. Fucking really? Always busting my balls. But that’s what we do around here.

“Really?” I look at my best friend, who still hasn’t removed the shades from over his no doubt bleary, red eyes. “ Archie ?”

“Fuck off,” he says with a smirk, and Oakley cackles.

“Really, Oakley ?” I tease my boss because even if he owns the company, he’s for sure just one of the guys too.

“Watch it. I sign your paychecks,” he jokes, and I laugh, standing up and getting ready to head out.

“Pretty sure your better half does that,” I quip, and Travis sighs as he shakes his head, while pouring himself some coffee to put up with all of us.

Oakley just snorts a quick laugh and then smacks me on the back. “You ready for this one? It might end up being a big job. You know the drill?”

“Yup. Go see them. Find out exactly what they want. Don’t upsell—but be very clear. Figure out an estimate. Get your approval. Get the customer’s approval, and then all the fun starts.”

“Hell yes,” he says proudly before sending me on my way. I hop into a company truck and head to the address. I know my way around here since I grew up here, but I don’t think I’ve been down this particular country road just yet.

I’m always up for an adventure though, and it’s nice out here. Quiet and peaceful. I can’t wait until I save up enough money to buy a house out in the country. My ultimate dream.

I pull up to the address—it’s off a gravel road and leads into a circle gravel driveway. The house is old, but it’s huge and seems to have been really taken care of. It’s a white two-story with a giant wraparound porch that I’m pretty sure Oakley would salivate over.

The guy loves porches. Maybe I can sell him one of Oakley’s custom porch swings. It would look charming as hell on this old house. I turn off the truck and then climb out, grabbing my clipboard and phone before heading up the steps and ringing the doorbell.

Oh, hot damn. I was not prepared for the man who opens the door. His dark brows are pulled up in a sort of irritated look, his full red lips in a pinched sort of pout. He has very neatly trimmed facial hair. His dark hair is longer, brushing the top of his shoulders with a slight wave to it, and his green eyes are so piercing, I nearly drop my clipboard and phone.

He’s beautiful. Way too pretty to be from around here. He looks like he belongs on some sort of glamorous runway or something. And apparently, I’ve forgotten how to form actual words because I just stand there, staring at him like an idiot.

“Can I help you?”

I try to shake away the fog of seeing the beautiful man standing before me and get my brain to actually work. “Dutton? Dutton Collins?” Okay, there we go. There are some

actual words.

“Yes.” He’s still looking at me suspiciously, and goddamn, do I wish I could get more words out so I could maybe help lessen that worry. He looks past me, and then his green eyes meet mine. “You’re with Oakley’s Crew?”

Well, at least one of us seems to be functioning. He looks at my shirt, where I proudly wear the Oakley’s Crew logo, and he must have seen the name on my truck. “Yes. That’s me. Well, I’m not Oakley. I’m Walker—not like the Texas Ranger. Though that guy was pretty badass.” Yeah, he’s frowning at me again, his dark brows all furrowed. Shut the hell up, Walker. Holy shit, you’d think this is my first job with the way I’m botching this. “I mean. I am with Oakley’s Crew, but I’m Walker. Walker Murphy. Not Oakley.”

“Or the Texas Ranger,” he states, and I can’t help but smile, my cheeks heating from the embarrassment.

“Right.”

“Okay.” He still seems hesitant, and I can’t really blame him. “So I, um... I should show you what I’d like?”

My brain short-circuits for a moment, thinking about him showing me exactly what he likes. My brain automatically going to his naked body under mine. In front of mine. Up against a wall. In the shower.

Oh, holy shit. I need to get ahold of myself. What the hell is wrong with me? Maybe I need to take Archie up on his offer to go out soon. Maybe we can go to the tavern, and I can find a non-client for my bed.

“Yes.” I barely manage to say it out loud, and yeah, he for sure thinks I’m a freak. I clear my throat and try to force myself into a professional mode. “Today is all about

finding out exactly what you want us to do.” There. That was close enough.

He nods his head and then walks out the front door. He’s wearing nice black jeans, a black t-shirt that clings to his lithe body, and some sort of black shoes that definitely give away that he’s not from here.

Most people around here wear boots or tennis shoes. Not the fancy sort of loafers or whatever those are on his feet. I follow him down the stairs and to the back of the house. There’s a huge yard, but it’s overgrown with high grass and weeds. Yeah. This is going to be a big and hopefully longtime job. Although, it will likely be the mowing crew and not my department.

I’m more a detailed-builds kind of guy. Oakley mostly hires college and even high-school students for the mowing crew. “Obviously, I’ll need the grass trimmed,” he says, looking around the yard, and I bob my head in agreement. “But some of the bigger projects I was thinking about would be back there.” He points further out on the property, and I squint, trying to see what he’s trying to show me. But all the grass and weeds make it impossible.

“Show me?” It comes out like a question. My voice comes out in this odd sort of husky tone I should be horrified by, but then his eyes meet mine, and I swear I see a flash of something there—interest maybe? But he quickly shutters his gaze and then leads me further through the weeds.

“This used to be a garden.” He points at a ton of overgrown weeds and wildflowers. “It needs a lot of work.”

“Gotcha,” I say, making a note. “Flower or vegetable?”

“Vegetable,” he says and then looks up toward the house. “Up by the front had a flower bed. I tried to clean it up myself, but I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

He looks a little lost, and I want to know his story. Not really appropriate, but it doesn't make it any less true.

“How long have you lived here?”

He laughs, but it's kind of sad—or maybe ironic? I don't know. I'm probably reading way too much into it. “A week,” he answers me. “And I don't even know if I'm going to stay. Maybe I should have just sold it.”

Strangely, the thought of him selling the house and leaving town before I even get to know him sends me into a panic. It makes no sense, but for some reason, I'm desperate for that not to happen.

“Trust me on this, good landscaping will help it sell faster, if that's what you decide to do.” He cocks his head to the side, trying to figure me out, I'm sure. Trying to decide whether I've put my salesman hat on. But it really is the truth, even if the reason I'm saying it might be for slightly selfish reasons. “I've seen it over and over. It helps with the presentation.”

His lips purse tightly and seems to be thinking it over. “Then I should show you what else I was thinking about.”

I can't help the over-the-top grin on my face and the sigh of relief.

Yes. Please.