



Side Out (Palm University #2)

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Category: Sport

Description: I knew from the moment I saw him moving into the house down the street. I knew that a man like Jackson Baker was going to be the one to turn my world upside down. I saw it coming a mile away. But what I didn't see coming was finding out he is one of my patients at my brand new job. I know it's wrong. I know it's against the rules. I know it could destroy the white picket fence that's being thrust upon me, and yet chasing Jackson Baker is a high I can't seem to quit.

Theodore Young. My neighbor. My Athletic Trainer. My every waking thought. My addiction. I should be spending my fifth year at Palm University my second chance at the perfect senior year making memories with friends, being the team captain everyone is counting on, and setting myself up for a career after college, and yet, the only thing I can think about is him. Watching him. Touching him. Kissing him. He's everywhere and nowhere all at once. But it's not enough. Because he's not mine and I know I can't have him. And yet, whenever I look into his eyes I know

THE GAME HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN.

****Side Out is an MM forbidden lovers, college romance. It will be book two in the Palm University Series.****

Total Pages (Source): 49

CHAPTER 1

THIRTY FLIRTY AND THRIVING

THEODORE

I 'm leaving the attorney's office after signing on the dotted line to finally close on my first house. ? * Growing up, I always thought I would be married, have a home, and have at least one kid by the age of thirty. And it seems like I'm well on my way, even though I'm not technically thirty—yet. My birthday is in a couple of months, but I swear, some days it feels as if I don't know how I got here. Where all the time went. After your twenty-first, it seems like you blink and pass another birthday like you pass GO in Monopoly.

I try to mentally replay all of the years in my head, trying to figure out how exactly I got to this point in my life, as I make my way to the moving truck with my car in tow behind it. I had to be out of my apartment a couple of days ago to make my way down here in order to sign the closing papers in time. My apartment. My life... all the way back in Ashburn, Virginia.

States away.

Climbing into the moving truck, I punch in my new address and head the long way around. The way I needed a break from my fian?ee is indescribable. When she's actually home and not traveling from store to store or supervising influencer trips as the marketing executive of a prestigious skincare line, she's—how do I put this gently... Unbearable.

Bridget and I grew up as neighbors our whole lives.

And no to the first question anyone asks when they hear that sentence...

We are not high school sweethearts.

We never even dated.

Bridget and I were never super close. We got along well enough, and I never had any issues with her. I didn't like or dislike her. My feelings for her were just... neutral. But I love and respect her parents as if they are my own. But, somehow, over the course of our adolescence, those parents, the same ones who I have nothing but the utmost respect for, raised an inconsiderate, vain, and entitled daughter. And all of those wonderful attributes seemed to be amplified by a hundred percent once she came home from college.

Both of us went off to college, graduated, and somehow returned to our hometown to live post-graduation. I was lucky to land a spot in the master's program close to home and a paid internship at the same college to become an athletic trainer. While Bridget landed an entry-level position at the same company she's working for now. I spent two years there, trying to become the best version of myself that I could. Meanwhile, any time I would see Mr. and Mrs. Koch with my parents they would try pushing me to go on a date with Bridget.

Eventually, I caved, and we went on one date. From that moment on it has felt as if I have had no say or recollection of anything that happened in my life. We went on another date, and another. And when I was sure she wasn't the woman I wanted to spend my life with, without a shadow of a doubt, our parents decided we needed to go on another.

We dated for four years, if that's what you want to call being glorified roommates,

and after hearing her bitch for three of those years about needing a ring, she ended up just getting her grandmother's from her mom. Of course, snatching the diamond out of it and getting a custom ring made herself.

When it was finished, she picked it up, put it on, and never even mentioned it to me. She just started telling people we were engaged.

All she said was, " I'll get a lot more respect now that people think I'm married to a rich man. "

Did I say anything to stop what was going on?

Nope .

Because every time I garnered up the courage to flee from my seemingly unrecognizable life, the only thing I could picture was my dad saying, "It's what we do, Son. It's what this family has always done."

Her dad told me a couple of days after seeing the ring on her finger, " Marriage is just a business contract and a way to earn respect. I need you to marry her... you keep her level-headed, and it would benefit the both of you. "

But I don't want any of it. It's as if I'm a passenger in my own life, except for the one thing I refuse to let anyone tamper with or get in the way of. My career.

It's something I have poured my heart and soul into and the one thing I am most proud of in this life. From the moment I decided that it was my calling, I drowned myself in school work, internship programs, and anything else I could get my hands on in order to become the best there is, graduate with a master's degree at the top of my class, and land a job I couldn't have imagined in my wildest dreams.

I'll be damned if I let anyone or anything get in the way of that.

* * *

Taking a right onto my new street, I pass a couple of houses before I see my pale yellow one come into view. It's a one-level, three-bed, two-bath, nothing super fancy, but the perfect starter home that I can make all mine.

Well... mine and Bridget's, but I can't let myself think of any of that right now. She's away on a business trip, unsurprisingly and completely uninterested in the purchase of our home, and in the meantime, this house is going to be my oasis.

I love this quiet little neighborhood and the lightly wooded area that the houses across the street butt up against. Palm trees line the front yards of each home that, despite living in suburbia, all look different. It's an older neighborhood, so it's clear that each house wasn't thrown together in months like they are nowadays. No, these were crafted with care. They were slowly built and built to last. Which is ironic considering that seems to be the exact opposite of my impending marriage.

I pull into my driveway, put the moving truck in park, and lay my head back on the headrest, finally taking a deep breath and shutting my eyes after a whirlwind few days.

I'm immediately pulled out of my restful state with banging on my window.

What the fuck?

A younger guy with a mop of dark Mahogany curls on the top of his head is standing at the side of the truck. Reluctantly, I open the door. "Can I help you?"

"We saw the Virginia plates when you pulled in and figured we would offer to help,"

says the other man, who's slightly taller and leaner with a lot straighter, jet-black hair.

"I could use it. You two aren't serial killers or anything, are you?"

"Emerson Baker." The one that's been doing the talking sticks his hand out to shake. "My brothers and I live across the street from ya. This fuck-stick is Dominic. Dom for short, but not in the bedroom... if ya know wha?—"

Dom cuts off Emerson by smacking him in the chest and hissing, "Stop introducing me like that! And that's not what you were saying last night on your knees with my coc?—"

Not needing to hear anything else, I say, "Okay, okay. Let's get this stuff inside."

* * *

Moving with Emerson and Dom was as interesting as you could imagine. We unloaded everything in record time, and I was thoroughly entertained, listening to the two college guys bickering back and forth.

The two of them left me to my own devices a couple of hours ago, and instead of unpacking boxes like I should be, I can't help but watch out my living room window as, who I assume is Emerson's brother since he looks exactly like him, unloads a copious amount of groceries from his car. He's in a worn cut-off, and his muscular, cut arms are on full display. My eyes linger as I examine each inch of them as he's unloading each bag of groceries. As he bends to get the last of the bags deep in the trunk, I zero in on the way his fucking short-inseam shorts cling to the back of his ass. He's a work of art.

Suddenly, I realize I never told the two of them I will be working at the school I'm

ninety-nine percent certain they attend. And what's worse, I'm not sure if that was intentional or not.

Fuck, what am I doing...

* * *

I find myself back at the front window, sipping my coffee like the true old fucking creep that I'm turning into. I have two more days of peace until Bridget flies in from her business trip, and I'm dreading her return.

Is it bad that I don't even know what city she's in right now?

Yeah... it is.

But I'm too busy ogling my new neighbor across the street.

Emerson and the oldest brother are outside, cutting their grass and taking care of the landscaping—no shirts on. His brother, who's name I still don't know, has those damn shorts on again. The sweat is already pouring off of him on this way too hot and humid Florida morning.

I sit down on my couch, watching shamelessly as they finish up their yard, make their way over to the older lady's beside them, and start to work on hers too. Unlike me, she's proudly sitting outside on the porch, watching the show, coffee in hand, rocking in her chair—the biggest smile lining her face.

We have a perverted old lady as a neighbor...

And I'm no better than her.

* ? Feeling Good - Nina Simone

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CHAPTER 2

THIS IS THE YEAR

JACKSON

“J ax! Come shake your ass with me!” Clay yells as he claps along to the beginning beats of ? * Shania Twain’s “Any Man of Mine.”

How he convinced the DJ to play this song is beyond me, but I shouldn’t be surprised. Clay has always had a way of getting people to do what he wants them to. Not in a bad way, though. He’s always had the natural ability to connect with people on a level that others can’t. He’s the definition of a golden retriever, which is why my best friend is probably one of the biggest players on campus.

And I’m not talking about volleyball...

I will admit that Shania Twain is one of the greatest country performers—nope, scratch that—one of the greatest performers of our time. I would quite literally worship at her feet if she was standing in front of me right now, but there are limits to what I will dance to in front of college students. Now, send me back home to Billings, and I’ll hoedown throwdown to Shania all night long.

“Jackson!” he screams over the sound of the nearing bridge, and I simply laugh and shake my head. Two seconds later, he’s mouthing the lyrics and making his way over to me, and I realize I’m not about to have a choice in the matter. The entire house erupts in chants as they sing along, just as Clay fists the front of my shirt and pulls

me toward the dance floor.

“Sometimes I wonder why I’m friends with you.” I laugh as he continues to pull me.

He stops his singing to answer, “Because I’m funny and handsome, and you couldn’t live without me.”

He’s right. I couldn’t live without him. He’s one of my favorite people on the planet and my brother. We may not be brothers by blood, but I would die for him just as I would my real brothers. But I’m not going to say that out loud, so instead, I take a swig of my beer, hold the cup in the air, and shout along with the last chorus.

God, I’m going to fucking miss this.

This is our party before we kick off our final year at Palm University. This is the year. Clay and I are going to win the championship this year, and we’re going to make our mark at this school before we have to leave. Before we officially start the next phase in our lives.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m excited to go back to Billings. To be with my family and start my career in computer science—hopefully, in security. There will never be another time in my life like this one.

One where I get to play the sport I love with one of my favorite people on the planet.

One where I get to live and make memories with my younger brother.

One where my only focus is on school, friends, parties, and volleyball.

I need to make the most of this year because I’ll never be able to do it again.

So, I channel my inner Clay and get lost in the moment.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the rest of the men's sand volleyball team come in the front door and grab themselves a drink. The team douche canoes, Chadwick and Prescott, included. On the other side of the room, Dominic, Emerson, and the rest of the hockey team are all crowded around the beer pong table, chugging down solo cups of beer like the brutes they are.

Every square inch of this house is filled with people from all different groups at school. It's going to be a bitch to clean up tomorrow, but right now, that's not my problem.

I'm pulled out of my melancholy feeling when my younger brother Emerson slaps my ass and yells obnoxiously loud, and way too close to my ear, might I add, "Mom would be so happy if she could see you dancing to Shania."

I don't even know how he got over here so fast. But then again, he's always been a sneaky little shit.

Emerson reaches into his jeans to pull out his phone. He raises it and is about to press record before I hit him with my most menacing big-brother glare. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Or what?" he asks with a cheeky grin.

"Ooooo, Emmy is in troubleeeee," Clay says with a mile-wide grin.

Emerson's smile falls as he glares back at my best friend. "What have I told you about calling me that?"

"And what have I told you." He boops Emerson on the nose with his pointer finger,

and I snort a laugh. “You are not the boss of me. Big-brother privileges.”

“You’re not my brother,” Emerson deadpans.

“Hmmm,” he mocks as he takes a gulp of beer. “Momma Catherine likes me the most out of all of you. So I beg to differ.”

“No she does not,” my brother snaps. He’s what you’d call a momma’s boy. We all are, honestly. But that’s generally what happens when your mom has four sons and no daughters, and you grow up on a ranch in Montana.

“She thinks I’m the most handsome too.” I snort another laugh. I will admit, my mom does have a particular soft spot for Clay. I think it’s because she knows he doesn’t have the parental support we do, and she tries to fill that void as best she can. Hell, I think if he were under the age, she would straight up adopt him.

“Sometimes I really wonder how you get laid as much as you do?” I can tell Emerson is trying to fight a smile as the two of them continue to bicker in the middle of the party.

“It’s called charisma, Emmy.”

“I have plenty. Just ask Dom.” Emerson winks.

Suddenly, Emerson’s attention snaps toward the direction of the front door, and a look of confusion takes over his face. “What’s our neighbor doing here?”

My stare follows his, and I’m met with a stunning blond-haired man with a chiseled jaw. He has on a pair of glasses that look like he stole them right off of Clark Kent, and he’s wearing a plain white T-shirt and a pair of sweats.

He may not belong here, but he's suddenly the only person I can focus on.

* ? Any Man of Mine - Shania Twain

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CHAPTER 3

OLD MAN THEODORE

THEODORE

Bridget's voice shrieks as she practically sashays through the front door. "Theodore! Get my bags from the rideshare! I can't spill my coffee."

? * Goddamnit . Here we go.

I can't say that I've particularly missed her or the demands that seem to almost constantly be spilling from that hole in her face one bit.

I nod while passing her, not giving her any verbal response, and head out the door. I grab her luggage from the guy's trunk, but when I spin around I notice that Emerson is out on their front porch dumping ice into some coolers. When he notices me he yells across the street, "Hey, neighbor!"

I give him a quick wave in return. "Hey!"

This isn't good .

I shouldn't have to feel like I want—no, need —to hide Bridget from our new neighbors, but I do. I don't want her to be disrespectful to them. And in order for that to happen, that would pretty much require her to never talk to them. Because nine times out of ten, something snarky almost always comes out, whether she does it on

accident or on purpose.

I haven't seen this woman be genuinely nice since we were kids.

My eyes land back on the house across the street, and as I further examine what's going on, I realize it looks like they're getting ready for... Shit.

Let's hope, to all things holy, that whatever they're planning isn't going to be as big as I have a feeling it's going to be on the first night my impossible-to-please fiancée is here.

I'll never live that down. She is already less than impressed that we live in a college town, let alone so close to campus.

Resigned to the fact that I have no control over the situation right now, I head back into the house. Not even a foot in the door and Bridget snaps, "Theodore, I told you I was having Regina come down to decorate. Why are there already things up on the walls?"

I hate it when she uses my full name, and she knows it. She insists it sounds more "highbrow" and "respectable" than Theo.

I deadpan, "I already had the decorations here. I can only stare at blank walls for so long." Setting her bags down by the front door, I level my stare with her as she looks at me as if I've lost my mind.

She pauses a minute and looks around. But I can see it in her demeanor. She wants to be here about as little as I want her here. And when she opens her mouth, I know what she's about to say before she even says it. "I can't believe we're living on the same street as all of these college kids. We're better than this."

Here we fucking go.

“This is for my job. I have to be here, remember? A college town will always be a part of my life.”

She acts like this is somehow all brand-new information. Like she hasn’t known since we were teenagers this is what I wanted to do.

Growing up, our families were incredibly close. We were neighbors but not the kind you’d see in the city. No, we were the kind of neighbors that were the only two houses on the whole thirty-mile back road. And on the sides of that road were vineyards as far as the eye could see. One side was theirs, and one side was ours.

I don’t have the energy or the mental capacity to get into the nuances of the entire situation at the moment, but it’s important to know that mine and Bridget’s marriage could be the only thing that will save the longevity of our family businesses. Something that I so carelessly put on the line with my “selfishness,” or so my father says, and something both he and Bridget’s father so often remind me of.

That thought stays in my brain for the rest of the day as I listen to her complain about any and everything she can find wrong with this house.

The house of my dreams.

One that’s now the centerpiece to my nightmare of a life.

* * *

“Theodore!”

The progressively higher and higher shrieking that’s coming from the master

bedroom should make me answer her, but it doesn't. I have a dull headache from keeping my jaw clenched tight enough to crack a molar since she got here. And now the tension in the house has increased ten-fold because the house across the street has finally turned up their music to an unavoidable level.

"Theodore Young!"

I hear her footsteps coming to find me in the kitchen, where I'm about to polish off my second glass of whiskey, and when her face comes into view, I down the last sip. "What?"

"Go over there and shut this monstrosity of a party down," she huffs out. "I just saw two naked people running through the front yard!"

I stare at her, hoping if I don't answer she will go back upstairs. But as I look at her, I'm reminded of the fact that, despite her personality, Bridget truly is beautiful. Blonde hair, perfect skin, long legs. Physically, she truly is every man's dream. But then she snaps her fingers at me, and I'm reminded of exactly who I'm dealing with.

I roll my eyes at her dramatics. "It was probably just a dare. Didn't you do crazy shit in college?"

She looks at me like I've grown another head.

I pour another splash of whiskey into my tumbler, down it, and slam my glass back on the counter before sliding my runners on. Maybe getting out from under the same roof as her will help clear my head a little.

Here comes old-man Theodore, coming to shut the fun down.

* * *

I should not be in this house right now.

I should not be at a college party filled to the brim with students who attend the college that now employs me.

And I definitely should not be three glasses of whiskey deep while stepping foot in here.

I spot a broody Dom over in the corner and give him a head nod before I'm scanning the room for the man I know who runs this house.

A split-second later I see a tall, dark-headed guy with dimples as deep as the Grand Canyon in the middle of the living room screaming lyrics to Shania Twain.

The guy on the dance floor is yelling the lyrics across the room at someone, and I find myself smiling at the antics. He makes his way across the room and grabs someone, who I can't quite see through the crowd, by the front of the shirt and pulls him to the middle of the room.

That smile is wiped off my face when I finally see who the other man is.

The man I haven't been able to keep my eyes off of from my window.

The man I don't know the name of.

I stand still in my spot for what feels like an eternity, as I watch Emerson approach them. A moment later, Emerson finally spots me. And... his brother.

And as he stares at me, it feels as if he can see straight into my soul. Even with the insanity that's occurring around us, it suddenly feels like we're the only two in the room.

All too soon he shakes out of a trance and practically bounces over to me. And the fact that he's coming to me, does little to ease the unexplained and sudden jealousy I have over him dancing with some other guy.

Which is why, when he finally gets to me and says, "Hi, I'm Jackson," I don't introduce myself like a civilized human being. Instead, I practically growl, "I need you guys to turn the music down."

* ? harder to lie. - elijah

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CHAPTER 4

MARG IS COOLER THAN YOU

JACKSON

He can't be serious.

After a week of catching him staring at me through his front window, which has been both creepy and flattering at the same time, this is the first thing he decides to say to me.

He's lucky I'm a nice guy.

And slightly buzzed.

I inhale a deep breath and do my best to maintain my composure. With a smile, I ignore his request and continue with the one-sided introductions. "You must be Theo. Young, right?"

"Right," he answers impassively.

Okay. Hard nut. "Emerson told me he and Dominic helped you move in. I apologize on their behalf for whatever they said."

I see the corners of his lips twitch. "They weren't that bad."

I huff a laugh. “The fact that you have to say they weren’t ‘that bad’ means they were that bad.”

Finally, his lips curl into a reluctant smile. “I’m just glad they were willing to help.”

“Would you like a drink?” I point my thumb over my shoulder to where there’s a variety of drinks in the kitchen.

“No,” he snaps a little too quickly. “I mean, no thank you. I already had a couple of glasses of whiskey at home. Best not push my luck.”

“Whiskey, huh?” I ask. “One of those days?” I know the answer before he even responds. I can see it all over his face. He looks... defeated.

“You have no idea.” His smile remains, but it’s weaker now. Reaching up, he rubs the back of his neck and pulls his stare from me. “Anyway... I just really need—” he sighs heavily. “If you guys could turn it down a little I would really appreciate it.”

It’s clear to anyone who has eyes that this guy has had an absolute shit day. And sure, it may be our last party before school kicks off on Monday, but I’m not a monster. Plus, considering the fact that people were running naked through our front lawn, I think it’s alright if we start winding things down a bit.

I turn my head back toward Emerson and whistle. “Hey! Em! Let’s turn the music down a bit, yeah?”

Emerson walks toward the DJ, and a moment later the volume of the music lowers. Not a single person notices... except for the man in front of me.

“Thank you,” Theo says.

Despite his uncomfortable demeanor, I pause a moment to take him in. He's clearly older than me, but I'm not sure by how much. He's shorter than me, which, considering my height, most people are, but he looks like he stays in decent shape. My eyes linger on the way his biceps snugly fill out his white cotton tee as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Well." He clears his throat, bringing my attention back up to his face. He one hundred percent just caught me, and I can't find it in me to care. "I'm gonna head out."

"Let me walk you out," I interject before he can so much as move a muscle.

"It's fine, I?—"

"Theo." His eyes widen at the use of his name. "Let me walk you out." My smile may be gentle but it's clear I'm not asking.

Theo nods and spins on his heel as we walk out the front door onto the porch. Almost immediately I realize it's darker out here than it should be. I look behind me to find the two lights on either side of the front door are missing their light bulbs. Ones that were definitely there before the start of the party.

"Fucking children," I mumble under my breath.

But apparently not quiet enough, because Theo asks, "What was that?"

"Those had lightbulbs in them a few hours ago," I answer with a half-hearted eye roll.

Theo chuckles and the sound washes over me. "College students do the weirdest shit."

“You’re telling me,” I laugh. “You know”—I lean against the porch railing in front of Theo, silently telling him I’m not in a hurry for him to leave—“Marg over there has never once complained about our music. You’re officially less cool than an eighty-year-old.”

“Probably has something to do with the fact she doesn’t want to risk being on bad terms with the men that mow her lawn shirtless.”

I fucking knew it. He has been watching.

? * I tilt my head inquisitively. “And how is it you know we’ve been mowing her lawn with our shirts off? Have you been watching me, Mr. Young?”

Suddenly, Theo’s eyes are the size of saucers, and it takes everything in me not to laugh.

“It’s hard to not hear her whistling at you,” he answers confidently.

Slowly, I push up off the railing, so I’m standing toe-to-toe with him. “And what about when I was unloading groceries?”

He swallows harshly and takes a step back. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“Hmmm.” I take another step closer, and he takes another step back. He could easily sidestep me, but he hasn’t. Yet. “And how about when I came back from my run yesterday morning.”

“I was... cleaning the window. Coincidence.”

I take one more step, except this time when Theo goes to move backward, he’s met with the front of the house.

It's a miracle nobody has come out here to interrupt us yet, but the beer coolers were moved inside hours ago, and anybody who would have come to this party is already inside. Looks like we have my, now dark, front porch all to ourselves.

I rest my hands on the house on either side of his head and lean down slightly, just to see if he pushes me away. And when he doesn't, I close the distance between my face and his, leaving only an inch of space. "I don't believe in coincidences."

Theo exhales a heavy breath as he looks up at me, and I can feel it against my lips. "Yeah, me either."

His green eyes bounce between mine, and I decide if I'm going to take a chance now is as good a time as any. Slowly, I move my hand from the siding to the nape of his neck. And I don't know if it was the glasses of whiskey he had before he came over here or not, but he doesn't move away.

"I should head home," he whispers, still not moving.

Even slower, I slide my hand to the front of his neck and grip it gently, using the pad of my thumb to keep his head tilted up at me. "Should you?"

"I—" He doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, the two of us stand there for a moment. Out on my front porch. Covered in darkness.

Theo inhales a shaky breath, and I can't fucking take it anymore. I crash my lips to his. He freezes for a moment, and when he grips the front of my shirt with both hands, I worry he's going to push me away. But instead, his body goes limp against the side of the house, and he pulls me closer. He groans against my lips, as I use my tongue to part his. And he groans again when I press my erection against his.

I don't know who this man is outside of being my new neighbor, and yet every fiber

of my being is begging me to get lost in him.

Theo lets me explore his mouth with my tongue, and I savor the way he tastes. The way he feels against me.

My lips pull from his for a moment, and I groan his name, “Theo.”

It’s like the sound of me saying his name again, snaps him out of whatever trance the two of us are under.

He pushes me away from him and sprints down the front steps and across the street without so much as another word or look back. I watch breathlessly as he unlocks his house and relocks it behind him.

“Who was that?” Clay’s sudden appearance next to me breaks my focus, just as Theo closes the curtains of his front window.

I run my hand through my hair, trying to silently catch my breath. Hoping Clay won’t notice me acting... well, however, it is that I’m acting. “My new neighbor I guess.”

And just maybe my new obsession.

* ? Talk Dirty - Daniel Di Angelo

CHAPTER 5

AM I STALKING A STUDENT?

THEODORE

I can't be doing this.

I shouldn't be doing this.

FUCK.

I slam the door behind me, close the curtains to the front window, and flop down in the accent chair, throwing my head back against the fluffy blanket draped across the back.

Then I hear her. "Theodore! The music!"

God fucking damn it.

Bridget comes stomping into the living room, her brows pulled together in question at my slumped form in the chair, but she doesn't say anything. The face she's making is enough to know that she's on the verge of an onslaught of questions.

Stopping her before she can start because, quite frankly, I don't have the bandwidth for it, I say, "Drop it, Bridget. They turned it down. That's enough." And with that, I brush past her to start getting ready for bed. As I stare at myself in the mirror while

brushing my teeth, I find myself trying and failing to cast what just happened across the street from my mind.

Because, based on the type of people that were occupying that party, there's one thing I'm about ninety-nine percent certain of.

Jackson Baker is one of my athletes.

* * *

? * The hockey coach's voice booms through the weight room. "This is our new athletic trainer, Mr. Young."

"Please call me Theo. It's very nice to meet all of you," I awkwardly say to the thirty young men who make up the hockey team here at Palm University. This is my least favorite part.

The introductions.

I've slowly been introduced to each of my assigned teams as their seasons start up, and today is the men's hockey team's first official practice of the season.

My eyes immediately land on Emerson and Dom. I won't lie and say it's not nice seeing some familiar faces in a sea of strangers.

It's been a couple of weeks since the night with Jackson. The moment he had me pushed up against the front of his house has been on repeat in my head—like a never-ending loop I can't seem to escape no matter how hard I try. Some days, the memory of it feels like it has the ability to be my undoing, and some days, it feels as if it's my saving grace.

Suddenly, Dominic and Emerson appear in front of me. “How did we not know you were the new athletic trainer?!” Emerson asks while Dom just stares at him. Emerson pauses a moment, and it’s like you can practically see the light bulb go on above his head. He smacks Dom on the chest and excitedly says, “Hell yeah. We’re neighbors with the athletic trainer!”

“I might have told you, but I can’t seem to get a word in edgewise when you two are together,” I answer with a grin.

Emerson wonders out loud, “We do talk a lot, don’t we?”

Dom starts to chuckle. “No, Em, you talk a lot... Enough for the both of us, actually.”

“I guess that explains you moving in,” Emerson says to me, ignoring Dominic’s remark.

“Yeah, I accepted the job over the summer. I’m excited to grow with the school,” I say honestly. “All the sports programs and coaches seem great. Palm University has a great athletics program.”

Dom jokes, “Woah there, big man, this isn’t a job interview. You can be real with us.”

Smiling, I answer, “I’m being serious. Every team, player, and coach here has been great to work with. It’s much tighter of a community than my last school.”

We talk back and forth for a minute; they introduce me to a couple of other players, and eventually, their coach whistles to head out to warm up before practice starts.

And just like I have been with every other team I’ve met so far, I’m excited to get to work.

* * *

I've been holed up in my office for most of the morning, making sure emails are caught up and that I don't have any new patients I need to make plans for before tonight's season opener. I have a few more minutes before I need to make my way toward the rink to tape up a couple of guys' ankles and work through some stretches with a player who is having issues with his hip flexor and another who pulled his hamstring a couple of weeks back. Taking advantage of the last few minutes of silence I'll have for the rest of the day, I'm going through my mental checklist and making sure I'm not forgetting anything I may need for tonight. It's been a busy month leading up to the first game, and with Bridget being gone for most of it, I've had the chance to really get into the groove here at Palm University.

Feeling as ready as I can be, I shut my computer down and lock my office. I quickly weave through the endless corridors at the practice facility before making my way into the concrete hallways that lead to the hockey arena. Palm University has a top-of-the-line sports complex, and several of the school's teams share this facility, including the volleyball and basketball teams. I give some smiles to the other staff of the hockey team that I, for the life of me, can't remember the name of, and then I'm stopped in my tracks. I spot Emerson's familiar build facing away from me, but that's not who catches my eye... it's his old brother standing there giving him what clearly looks like the big brother version of a pep talk before the game.

Jax has his hands on his brother's shoulders, talking low enough that I don't have a clue what's being said, but it gives me the perfect chance to sit back and admire his features. Again. Jax's jawline is something to truly marvel over, and those cheekbones... I've obviously never seen them, but I just know his parents have top-of-the-line genes. Despite being tall and lean, he fills out the charcoal-gray joggers he has on as if they were painted on his legs by Picasso himself. His stark black hair is just long enough to shag over his brows, and it's always in a perfectly messy yet styled look.

Being pansexual, I truly don't have a type. It's a full spectrum of what I enjoy looks-wise in a partner, but what it truly comes down to is their personality and soul. However, I'd be lying through my teeth if I said Jackson Baker's looks weren't a major issue for me. I don't think I've seen someone more attractive in my life.

I don't know why, but I remain standing in the hallway with my phone in hand, surely looking like a moron, acting like something has my full attention, when I hear the door to the locker room open and close. Before I even have the chance to look up, I can feel Jackson spot me from down the hallway. And when I do grow the balls to pull my face from my phone, he's staring a hole through my head with a shit-eating grin on his face.

He walks down the hall toward me like he owns the place. "Well. Well. Well. If it isn't, Mr. Young."

"Jackson Baker, it's a pleasure to see you again," I say, trying to keep the interaction as professional as possible.

My phone vibrates in my hand for real this time, and I mindlessly look down. A blanket of dread envelopes me when I see who's name is on the screen.

Bridget

I'll see you tonight at the hockey rink.

I've gone through multiple other sports' season openers and countless practices so far this year, and now that it's October, several of the teams are well into their seasons. Not once has Bridget shown her face on campus, let alone at an actual game. But, of course, the first one she decides to make an appearance at just so happens to be the first time I see Jax other than staring at him through my front window, getting out of his car, or walking into school behind him.

Fuck, am I stalking a student?

Nope. No. The answer is no. I want to make sure he makes it here safely. That's all. Plus, I only do that two days a week when he has early classes.

Shit. I know his schedule. I shouldn't know his schedule...

Jackson's voice pulls me from my inward spiral. "The pleasure's all mine, Mr. Young." I can't help but suck in a breath at him calling me "Mr. Young." It shouldn't send a jolt of electricity to my cock... but it does.

My mind drifts back to Bridget's text. I know worry is lining my face, and confusion covers Jackson's, but I can't do this with him.

My voice comes out gruff. "We can't do this here."

I shouldn't have added "here" because we can't be doing this period.

Not on campus.

Not in the sports complex before a season opener.

Not at all.

Period.

Jax murmurs under his breath, "This explains the running off that night..."

And with that, I spin on my heel and do what I've done every time I'm face to face with Jackson Baker.

What I do best.

I run.

* ? Show up - Landon Tewers, Waynewood, JavyDade

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CHAPTER 6

HOT FOR... ATHLETIC TRAINER?

JACKSON

There are five things I'm acutely aware of right now.

One: Theo is on campus. Two: Not only is he on campus, he's on a part of campus that's restricted to athletes and staff. Three: He definitely had on a Palm University polo... typically reserved for... staff. Four: I would bet my right fucking knee that as soon as he saw me, he thought about that night on my porch. Which would explain why I've caught him repeatedly staring at me out his living room window. And why he's been following me around campus. And why he just ran from me like his ass is on fire. And five: His ass looked fucking delicious in those khakis.

* * *

Emerson's team won their season opener four to two. And considering my baby brother is only a sophomore playing on the third line, he gave it his all. I'd be willing to bet anything that both he and Dominic will be starting players next year. They both have worked too hard and are too good not to be.

But despite how impressed I was with Emerson's defensive skills, my eyes kept wandering to him. He's an athletic trainer.

Theodore Young, my neighbor, the man I made out with on my front porch, is an

athletic trainer at my school.

I'm not sure if that makes me incredibly lucky or incredibly unlucky.

Jury is still out.

But, because I'm well, me... I can't just let sleeping dogs lie. This is exactly why I'm still standing outside of the hockey rink in the parking lot. Right next to the doors, in the dark, even though Emerson left twenty minutes ago, and there's quite literally no other reason for me to be here.

Besides him of course.

Ten minutes later, the door opens, and I spot a familiar head of blond hair. Having it queued up on my phone since I got out here, I press play on my phone. I stay leaning against the brick wall beneath the light as the lyrics to ? * Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" echo through the almost empty parking lot.

The grin on my face is so wide it's hurting my cheeks.

Theo stops in his tracks, and his sigh is so loud I swear I hear it all the way over here. He drops his duffle on the ground and slowly turns to face me. He levels me with a menacing glare. Silently commanding me to turn the music off.

But I'm not one to really take orders from other people. Especially when a game is at stake.

And this has the potential to be the most exciting game I've ever played.

So instead of silencing my phone, I raise a brow, hold my phone out in front of me, and turn it up louder.

I see him mouth something along the lines of, “For fuck’s sake,” before he looks around and marches over to me.

He reaches for my phone as he hisses, “I’m not a teacher, and you fucking know it.”

Knowing I’m taller than him, I hold it straight up in the air. “No, you’re not. But there’s not a song that says ‘hot for athletic trainer,’ and I thought this was pretty clever if you ask me.”

Theo’s nostrils flare as he inhales a frustrated and exhausted breath. “Not clever, Jackson. It’s...” He’s panicked, looking around again. “It’s childish and irresponsible. Turn it off. Now.”

Okay, nope. Don’t like that.

Dropping my smile, I narrow my eyes, pause the music, and pocket my phone. “So here’s how this is going to go,” I snarl. “I don’t care who you are. If you’re staff or not, or if you’re older than me. You’re not gonna talk to me that way.”

I can tell my tone catches him off guard as I watch his Adam’s apple bob in his throat as he swallows harshly, but he rights himself and stands tall. “I can talk to you however I want when you’re putting my job at risk, Jackson.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you worked for the school? It doesn’t take a genius to figure out we’re students.” I let my eyes dance between his as he tries to come up with some bullshit excuse.

“I didn’t think it was important,” is all he manages.

I huff a humorless laugh. “Should have been pretty important when I had my tongue down your throat.” Theo’s lips part at the memory. “Don’t you think, Mr. Young?”

“Don’t call me that,” he snaps.

“But that’s your name, isn’t it? That’s what your students call you?” The thought of me calling him that as he’s on his knees in front of me sends a wave of pleasure straight to my cock.

My gray sweats do nothing to hide my obvious arousal, and it takes Theo all of five seconds to notice out of his periphery.

“Jackson...” he pleads. Whether he’s begging for mercy or for more, I’m not really sure. And I’m also not sure I give a fuck.

“Or do you prefer your athletes call you Theo?”

“I don’t?—”

“What do you want me to call you in just a few weeks when I walk into your office after practice?” Theo’s eyes widen. “Oh, didn’t you know? I’m on the men’s sand volleyball team. You’re going to be my athletic trainer too, neighbor.”

“Jackson, we can’t?—”

My eyes zero on his lips. It’s like they call to me. It’s like he calls to me. Which is exactly why I cut his bullshit off again and say, “Too late.”

* ? Hot for Teacher - Van Halen

CHAPTER 7

HANDBOOK NEEDED

THEODORE

T his fucking boy, I swear on all things holy, he loves to push my buttons. And somehow, in the span of two face-to-face conversations he pressed damn near everyone of those buttons.

? * His cock is hard in the parking garage.

The parking garage is my place of employment.

There's no handbook for this, or at least not one I remember reading in school. And it certainly isn't in my employee handbook. I never thought it would be an issue. I have self-control.

Right?!

But then Jax is staring at my mouth, and I watch his lush lips say, "Too late." I know any semblance of self-control I thought I had is gone in an instant, as lost as the shell I threw into the ocean just a few days ago.

My hands land on his hips, and I grab them with all my might, wanting to leave him with something from me, even knowing I can't have him. The power he has in his lean body is practically vibrating beneath my skin. His lips are something I could

easily become lost in.

And I do.

Pressing my front to his just like we did that night not too long ago, our breaths become one, and the pull I feel toward this man is something I can't explain. I barely know him. He's at least ten years my junior. I'm engaged. He's a student. And yet, all I can think about is how every fiber of my being feels complete when I'm near him.

When I'm touching him.

Like an addict needing their next hit, I let my tongue slide against his in the heat of the moment. My hands roam, grip, and explore every inch within my reach, and his moans are almost enough to get me to forget about the fact that anyone could walk past and see us.

Almost.

It feels like we've been in this parking garage for hours, but in reality, I know it's only been a couple of minutes. I pull away, breaking the spell that has us hooked on each other. My glasses have shifted down my face from all the jostling, and I huff under my breath, "I should've worn my contacts."

Jax purrs, "Your glasses are one of my favorite things about you, Mr. Young . It's giving very Clark Kent vibes."

He shoots me a wink, and as much as I don't want to stop, the logical side of my brain knows we have to. And I realize—"Fuck, Jax. There are cameras out here." I run my clammy hand through my tousled hair. "I'm going to get fired before my first semester is over."

“Ahh, ahh, ahh, Mr. Young... do you not know what I do? What I’m going to school for?” His brows are pulling together in question.

“What do I look like, Jax? A stalker?”

He chuckles at that. “Well, from my observations, you very well could be stalking me.” He starts counting on his fingers with each thing he’s noticed I’ve done. “You know my schedule. You stare at me anytime I’m outside. I see you behind me, walking into school most days. You?—”

I smash my lips to his again, trying to get him to stop pointing out the apparent stalking behavior that I definitely have been partaking in.

I would call it a little obsession, though—nothing to be concerned over.

I pull back with a lazy, dazed smile even though my brain is quite literally going a million miles a minute. “Fine. What are you in school for, Jackson?”

“Ooooo. Jackson,” he mocks, and I stare at him deadpan. “Right. Focus. Computer science.”

“And you think you can get into the school’s security system?” I ask in disbelief.

He waves his hand dismissively and puffs out his chest in pride. “Please. My skills rival Kevin Mitnick.”

I raise a brow. “And I’m supposed to know who that is?”

Jax looks at me in disbelief. “Hacked into NORAD. Was one of FBI’s most wanted? You know what... nevermind. Yes. I can erase the footage.”

“How do you know how to do all of this so well, exactly?”

His muscular shoulders shrug. “Grew up in Montana. Outside of sports, school, and chores, there’s not exactly much to do in the winter. One day, I started messing around with computers and coding. Figured out I was good at it, so... I went with it.”

So he’s from Montana, good to know. “So you’re a hacker?” For some reason, the image of this man sitting in front of a computer makes me smile.

I haven’t smiled this much in a while. And despite everything that this is... or isn’t... when I’m around him, it feels... good.

He shrugs and says, “Pretty much. But as far as the school is concerned... I just want to go into security.”

We’re still so close to one another, and I don’t want to pull away. But I have to.

I. Have. To.

So, once again, as I remember all of my responsibilities in life, I let my smile fall and step away from him.

Confusion and concern cover his face, but before he can say anything, I cut him off. “This can’t happen again. Goodnight, Jax.”

Without another word, I get in my car and head home to my fiancée.

* ? COFFIN - PLVTINUM

CHAPTER 8

I NEEDED A NEW GROCERY STORE

JACKSON

I t's been a week since we kissed in the parking lot.

An entire week of me wanting to bury myself deep inside of him every time I see him.

Which, admittedly... has been... a lot.

Because I can't get myself to stop.

? * He's been doing everything in his power to avoid me. He's stopped following me to campus. He's stopped looking at me through his living room window. He's stopped coincidentally getting the mail at the same time as me. And that just won't do.

So now, I follow him.

I can't stop.

I've been late to classes. Late to workouts. I've canceled plans with Clay. I've missed FaceTimes with my family. All because I can't get myself to stop. Wherever he is, is where I want to be.

No, need to be.

I watch him during Emerson's practices. I watch him come in and out of the sports complex. I found out which grocery store he shops at, and it now just so happens to be where I shop... at the same time as him.

To be quite frank, it's taken every ounce of my power not to break into that little yellow house across the street and set up cameras so I can always have an eye on him.

My new obsession.

But that would be crazy, right? Right.

I'm obsessed. I'm obsessed with seeing him every chance I get. I'm obsessed with staring into his green eyes as he grows more and more frustrated with his desire to want me too. I'm obsessed with the thought of tasting him again. I'm obsessed with imagining every which way he can be completely mine .

So I watch.

I'm always watching him.

I. Can't. Stop.

And I know he thinks we can't. I know he's in an impossible position. And I know none of this is healthy.

But then again... it wouldn't be an obsession if it was healthy.

* ? Real Life - The Weeknd

CHAPTER 9

RUN

THEODORE

L ike the obsessed man I've become, I'm spending my morning staring out my front window, staring at the eerily-quiet house across the street. I'm on my second cup of coffee with my favorite salted-caramel creamer, and I don't have the urge to move any time soon.

Emerson suddenly pops out their front door. Not the man I was looking for, but at least it's something. My eyes stray to the piles of Halloween decorations in his hands.

Fuck.

It suddenly dawns on me what day it is. The Saturday before Halloween.

They're throwing another party—I can feel it in my bones.

Because the last party went over so well for me.

At least Bridget won't be here. She hasn't been all week, but what else is new? I couldn't even tell you where she is, but I remember her saying she needed her passport. I zoned out after that, though. However, I do know that she'll be gone for at least another week. If not longer.

All I want to see is Jackson. It's been too long. I've been fighting this whole month with myself to put distance between us. I stopped following him into school, stopped watching out my window, and have been actively avoiding him when I see him on the school grounds or in any of the practice facilities.

And it's only made what feels like a gaping hole in my chest even bigger.

As the day goes on, I see more and more people heading into the Bakers' house while I'm doing my weekly chores around my own house, looking across the street any chance I get.

I go downstairs to put away a suitcase that Bridget decided not to use for this trip and left out. And out of the corner of my eye, I spot my bin of Halloween decorations I clearly forgot to put out this year. And next to that bin... the one filled with all of my old costumes. I stare at it for what feels like hours, contemplating every possible scenario, before I finally make my decision.

Fuck it.

I decide right here and now that I'll be crashing that party whether they like it or not.

I need my eyes on Jackson Baker.

* * *

Despite the usual stifling Florida air, it's finally starting to feel a little like fall. And thank god because the sweltering heat would've had me sweating like a whore in church beneath this full-face skull mask.

It's just before midnight when I finally grow the balls to walk out my back door, lock it, and slide my keys into my back pocket. The last thing I need is someone's door

camera capturing footage of me in this get-up walking over to the party. So I follow my privacy fence that leads down my driveway, and, as stealthy as possible, move to the sidewalk. Then, like the true fucking creep I am, I walk over to Jax's house and make my way to the backyard where most of the noise seems to be coming from.

Correction, the music is booming inside the house, but the sounds of laughter and fun echo in the backyard. There's a small bonfire going, groups of people talking, and guys holding each other up doing keg stands.

Nice to see some college traditions never die.

"Oh my fucking god, yeeesss, we have another masked man here. I love Halloween," some girl screams, as she runs up to me with her hands out.

"Stop!" I throw my hands up and back away from her like she's a rabies-infested animal.

"Playing hard to get? I like it." She twirls her hair around her fingers and bites her bottom lip.

My eyes roll so hard I fear they might get stuck in my skull. "Do you know where Jax is?"

Confusion and disappointment take over her face before she throws her thumb over her shoulder and says, "I just saw him inside on the dance floor a couple minutes ago with Clay. But you don?—"

I cut her off, sidestepping and spinning around her grabby hands to make my way inside. "Thanks!"

I run to the backdoor and make my way through the kitchen. As I round the corner,

my eyes land on a gleefully happy Jackson Baker's face popping out of the center of a blowup Patrick Star costume. And little to my surprise, the same man who was dancing with him at the beginning of the year, who I'm assuming is Clay, is next to him in a matching Spongebob Squarepants one.

I laugh beneath my mask at their ridiculous costumes as I find a spot against the wall in the living room, letting the lyrics of ? * "Maneater" by Nelly Furtado wash over me.

Bobbing to the beat, I find myself completely enamored by Jax and the happiness he seems to carry around with him anywhere he goes. But then I see it, and my heart stops.

He looks out his front window at what could only be my house and just stares for a second. A brief look of sadness washes over him before he leans in and whispers something in Clay's ear, and then moves toward the front door.

My feet follow him before my head has a chance to stop me. Jax walks past people milling around the front porch, steps off, and makes his way toward the street. Clearly making a beeline straight for my house. I manage to easily catch up to his waddling form, grab his arm, and pull him to me.

"What the f—" He stops as his eyes meet mine. I should have known this wouldn't be enough to fool him.

"Theo? Is that you?"

I answer with a question, "Doesn't that ruin the game?"

He seethes, "What are you doing here?"

“Where were you just going?”

He huffs in annoyance, crossing his arms over his chest. But the pink blow-up fabric doesn't allow him to move as desired, and I can't help but burst out in laughter at this ridiculous scene.

I stand there and laugh so hard, bent over wheezing, tears stream down my cheeks beneath my mask. When I'm finally able to get it together, I dab inside the eye holes of my mask to try to collect the tears, and when I look back up at Jax I find him clearly unamused.

“I was coming to ask you if the music was too loud,” he deadpans.

“Bullshit.” His brows raise at my blunt response.

“I didn't want your old ass to be over there alone, so I was coming to see if you wanted to come to the party, okay?” Alright, that very well could be the truth, but it still leaves me with too many questions.

“Jackson Baker, I am not that old.”

His curiosity peaks. “How old are you, Mr. Young?”

Shit. I walked right into that one. Sighing, I answer regrettably, “Thirty.”

He moans and bites his fist dramatically. “You can't say you're thirty while you're wearing a fucking mask in my front yard.”

“And why not?”

Damn it, Theo. You're playing with fire.

His face falls again, but it's not in frustration or anger this time. No, this time it's... acceptance. "I don't have an ounce of self-control left in me when it comes to you," he says softly, and despite his ridiculous costume, it fucking does me in.

Fire is better than being left out in the cold.

I take two steps closer so the two of us are standing as close as possible. Reaching up I brush a wayward strand of hair from his forehead. We both bristle at the touch. "Good. You don't need any tonight," I say as my eyes dance between his.

He raises a brow and whispers, "We shouldn't be doing this... remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," I say softly, but I'm actively going against every alarm bell that's going off in my head at the moment.

"Theo," he says my name the same way he always seems to. Like he's begging me and exhausted by the situation all at the same time. And I've got to say, I'm really growing tired of it... despite how wrong I know all of this is.

So I say the one word that's been ringing through my brain since I saw him head toward my house.

The one word that just might make this wild man listen to me.

For once.

"Run."

* ? Maneater - Nelly Furtado

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CHAPTER 10

RUNNING.

JACKSON

Am I dressed as Patrick Star?

? * Yes.

Am I running through the woods being chased by my hot neighbor in a mask?

Also yes.

Do I care about any possible judgment?

Not one bit.

* ? RUNRUNRUN - Dutch Melrose

CHAPTER 11

WE CAN'T BE DOING THIS

THEODORE

Behind Jax's house is a tree line of huge live oaks, longleaf pines, and, of course, palm trees. It's a gorgeous during the day, but running through them at night is something everyone should experience once in their life.

? * And today, my experience is chasing Jax. Who, just so happens to be dressed in a blow-up costume, with slides on his fucking feet. The entire situation is actually beyond ridiculous if you stop and think about it and is a serious injury waiting to happen. But for once, I turn my brain off and let myself take what I want. For once.

Jax is fucking fast too, and him being in this costume should be a turn off, but just the sight of him running has my cock waking up behind my black cargo pants.

Only one thought is bouncing around in my head as we weave in and out of these trees, and that's catching Jax, forcing him to the ground, and feeding my cock down his throat.

He's jumping over overgrown tree trunks and down limbs at a lightning speed, but I've got the right shoes on for this, and I'm not dressed as a giant pink star. Which means, I'm gaining on him by the second. He fucks up when he looks over his shoulder to see how far I am from him, and I watch in slow motion as he falls over a large branch and goes tumbling to the ground.

He rolls over on his back and tries his best to scoot away from me. “You should be scared, pretty boy.” My voice doesn’t sound like mine—it’s deeper, grittier, and the need lacing it is heady.

His shaky voice pleads, “Please don’t do this.”

I immediately stop in my tracks. This might all be a part of the game we’re playing, but the last thing I want to do is hurt or take advantage of him. So I need to make sure. “Use the stop light method if you want this to slow down or stop. What’s slow down?”

With the most trusting eyes, he says, “Yellow.”

“Correct, and what’s stop?” It’s so different not hearing his usual joking manner.

“Red.”

“Good boy,” I praise him, and the whimper that leaves him has me smirking behind my mask.

“And what are you at in this moment?”

He practically moans his answer this time. “Green.”

I take that as my green light, literally.

My hands find my button and zipper, making quick work of both. My eyes leave my pants and look at Jax sprawled out on the forest floor, watching me carefully as I undo my pants. He’s biting his lip as I shuffle my pants and boxers down my hips to free my aching cock.

“Fuck. Yes,” he whispers as he gets to his knees.

I pull the costume from his head so nothing will be blocking my view of him taking my cock.

“You’re going to show me how good that mouth of yours is at sucking my cock.”

He starts nodding his head before the last words have even left my mouth.

Running his hands up my thighs, his needy eyes look up at me. “I’ve only dreamt of this view, Mr. Young.” And with that, he grabs my length and drags his tongue up the underside of my already pulsing cock. “And it’s better than anything I could have imagined.”

“Open. Tongue out,” I command.

And he listens so well—contrary to every interaction we’ve had so far. He opens his mouth wide, tongue out as far as possible, begging for me. Giving him what we both want, I give it to him.

“Give me more,” he begs.

“Keep making those pretty noises, and I’ll give you some more,” I encourage him. He sucks me into the back of his throat, and I see stars.

Grabbing the sides of his head, I gear up to start hammering into his perfect mouth. “Tap my thigh if it’s too much.”

He nods while his mouth is full, and I don’t need anything else to use him like I’ve been wanting to for weeks. It’s what I’ve dreamt about any time I dare let my mind wander.

I can see him looking around, most likely making sure we really are alone. Who knows if we are, but I feed into it nonetheless. “Does getting your mouth fucked out here in the woods have your cock leaking for me?” He shuffles from side to side on his knees, and I know the answer. “I bet that cock of yours is weeping at the thought of getting caught, isn’t it?” He gives me another whimper, and his eyes are lined with tears from straining to take all of me.

This shouldn’t be this hot.

I shouldn’t have my cock in a student's mouth.

And yet, here I am, watching with rapt attention as he slides his lips down my cock all the way to my pelvis, holding there, and gagging. He repeats it time and time again. Drool running down his chin, and tears streaming down his cheeks.

I rub my thumbs across his cheekbones, collecting the tears, and giving him the praise he’s so earned. “You cry so pretty for me.”

His hand finds my balls, and the first couple of rolls between his fingers has my head falling back on my shoulders. After a few more bobs of his head, I say through clenched teeth, “Fuck, Jax, you’re going to make me come.”

His eyes are begging for it, and he sucks me down and swallows around my head. That does me in. I’m free-falling off the ledge into pure bliss. With my hands still on his head, I hold him there. And to my pleasant surprise he swallows every last drop.

I pull from his mouth, and he wipes the evidence from his chin. He grabs my outstretched hand letting me pull him up to stand. Once he’s upright, he doesn’t waste a second. He lifts my mask up and crashes his mouth into mine, and I let myself sink into his fierce kiss. I groan into his mouth as I taste my release on his tongue. Then, I hear a branch crack in the distance, and I rip my lips from his. My brain finally

catches up to my dick, and I realize the situation I have put us in.

Despite the all consuming urge to fuck him against one of these trees, I simply smile weakly and pull my mask back down. “Come on. I’m sure your friends are wondering where you ran off to.”

Hurt crosses over his face, and I know I’ve fucked up. “I-I don’t want my friends... I want you, Theo.”

Fuck this was a bad idea.

What the hell was I thinking?

What good could have come of this?

Was I going to take him back to my place, let him play house, and send him across the street when Bridget was due home?

Jackson Baker is a fucking student at the school that employs me.

I’m engaged to be married.

He has his whole life ahead of him, and I’m going to fuck it up for the both of us.

I know all of this. And yet, here I am.

So, despite everything I want, I do what I have always done, and do what is right. Ignoring his plea, I say regretfully, “Come on. Let’s go.”

The two of us walk through the woods in silence on our way back to his house. The sounds of the upbeat party music are a stark contrast to how both of us are feeling.

And once we reach his back yard I stop on the property line. He takes a couple steps before he realizes I'm no longer next to him. And when he turns around to look at me, I can tell he knows what I'm about to say before the words even leave my mouth. But I have to say it anyway. We both need to hear it.

So, I say the words that I've uttered way too often, "We can't do this Jax."

* ? Nowhere To Go - Bad Omens

CHAPTER 12

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER PRACTICE

JACKSON

“Hey,” I say to Clay as the two of us walk down the hall from the locker room to the practice gym. “Did you hear about Sanders?”

Aaron Sanders was another senior on the team and Rocky Campos’ doubles partner. Talk to the guy for five minutes, and he’s exactly what you’d expect. A cocky rich kid who has absolutely no respect for anyone or anything besides himself. He’s an asshole to everyone he meets and has gotten this far in life on his name alone.

Turns out, he’s a fucking creep too. Over the weekend he was charged with sexual assault and placed in jail. Rumor has it he drugged and raped some innocent girl at a party. Not that he cares, because I’m sure he spent all of five minutes in jail before his parents bailed him out.

However, the dean of the school and Coach Taylor have officially kicked him off the team, which means Rocky is left without a doubles partner during his senior year.

Despite Rocky being the most standoffish person on the team, he’s a truly exceptional player and has the potential to go far in sand volleyball.

? * I feel for the guy, I really do.

“Yeah. Not surprised. Guy is a grade-A fucking asshole.”

Once we enter the gym, I spot Rocky already starting his stretches. He’s a bit of a lone wolf. “Sucks for Campos, though.”

Clay takes a swig of his water before setting the bottle on the bench. “Yeah. I couldn’t even imagine losing my partner senior year.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“Come on.” Clay grabs a volleyball and tosses it to me. “Let’s go warm up.”

As the two of us walk onto the court, I do a fast scan for Theo.

Nothing.

Not that it’s any different from how he’s been the last two months.

I thought that once the season began and we started practice it would be better. But it hasn’t.

Except for the first practice, when he came in to introduce himself and I almost felt my heart fall out of my ass, he has made himself scarce. Only interacting with players from our team in the physical therapy rooms or in the weight room. Besides the first day he hasn’t made a single appearance in the gym or out on the sand. And every time I see him in passing he won’t dare to make eye contact with me.

And I can’t confront him because I’m always surrounded by teammates when I see him, and as desperate as I am, I wouldn’t put him in that situation.

But I’ve barely seen him at all since Halloween. He’s avoided me in every way

possible, and it's really starting to piss me off. Unless I make the effort to follow him in the shadows, it would be like he dropped off the face of the planet.

And when I went back to Montana for the holidays I wasn't able to feed my obsession at all. I felt like I was going out of my mind at the absence of him being near. I know my family could tell. And when my dad asked me what was going on, I didn't have a way to explain that I was obsessed with my thirty-year-old neighbor who is my physical trainer, so I just put on a smile and said nothing.

Because that's apparently all this is to him. Nothing.

He got me addicted to him, and he pulled away.

Again .

It's our first practice back after break, and I'm feeling desperate. Desperate to hear him say my name. Desperate to touch him, even if it's just the brush of a shoulder. Desperate to simply see him.

"Jax!" Clay yells from the other side of the court.

"Huh? Yeah. What's up?"

"I asked if you were ready?"

I look around the gym one more time, before settling on the fact I'm not going to see him today. "Yup. Ready."

* * *

"Shit," I grunt as Rocky slams another hit at me. We're warming up with a simple

hitting and receiving drill, and since Rocky doesn't have a partner, he's been doing most of the hitting. He's obviously beyond pissed. Rightfully so. But could he chill the fuck out for five minutes before my arms fall off. "I legitimately think my arms are going to bruise."

Clay chuckles, and we both get into our ready positions for another hit. "Don't be such a pansy-ass," he jabs.

Coach Taylor sets the ball outside. Rocky takes his approach and drills the ball down the line. Clay moves just in time to receive the pass. Except, when it hits his forearms he's not quite steady on his feet yet, and the force behind Rocky's hit knocks him on his ass.

I can't help it. I laugh my ass off as I make my way over to his stunned form. It's not often a player gets the better of Clay. I'm secure enough in my skills to know that he's one of the best players I've ever seen. But so is Rocky. "Who's the pansy-ass now?" I ask as I hold out my hand to help my best friend up.

"Shut the hell up," he grunts.

Despite everything going on outside of volleyball, the one thing I can always count on is for this sport to clear my mind. To make everything seem okay.

Even when I find myself questioning who I am, volleyball helps remind me I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

* * *

Another day, another practice.

But at least today we're able to get some scrimmaging in. Until now, it's been

nothing but conditioning and drills. And if Coach Taylor made us do one more targeting drill I was going to bury myself in the sand.

Coach has Clay and I scrimmage one of the junior teams. And even though they're a junior pair, they're every bit as talented.

They're on this team for a reason.

Which is why Clay and I are both pouring sweat by the second game of the set.

"Holy fucking shit," Clay huffs as he wipes his face with his shirt. "I ate too many christmas cookies for this shit."

"Shut up and set me the ball." I'm too tired to make jokes, because... same.

One of the juniors serves the ball over the net, and despite its power, it lands perfectly on my forearms. I pass it high to a waiting Clay at the net. I'm already moving by the time Clay quickly sets the ball. Except on my second step my foot slides and my knee buckles. I feel it happen before my body even hits the floor.

The sharp pain reverberates all the way up my hip and back down again. Pulsing so hard I can practically feel it in my teeth.

Fuck.

I lay on the floor, grabbing my knee in pain as I hear Coach Taylor shout for Theo.

God fucking damn it. This cannot be happening.

Clay and Coach Taylor drop to the ground beside me, and the rest of the gym remains silent as I hear a pair of footsteps sprinting across the floor. Theo is beside me just a

moment later.

This was supposed to be my year.

I feel tears sting my eyes at both the pain in my knee and the thought of everything that is about to be lost. But when Theo places his hand on my arm, and I look up at his sage-green eyes, I manage to take a deep breath.

He's here. I'm looking at him.

Theo's here.

* ? Under Pressure (feat. Chase Atlantic) - RILEY, Chase Atlantic

CHAPTER 13

WHO'S THEO?

THEODORE

Seeing players injured is part of the job.

It's something I've seen countless times. It's something I'm used to.

But it's never been Jax. And seeing him lying on the floor writhing in pain as he stares up at me, tears in his eyes, gripping onto his knee so hard his knuckles are white, just may be my undoing.

And despite how much it's tearing me up on the inside, I know I have a job to do. I can't let my complicated feelings for him... for whatever this is, cloud my ability to do this job. He deserves the best care I can give him. "Tell me what happened."

He groans in pain. "I-I must have stepped wrong, and— ouch, fuck— and I felt something pop. The pain was instant."

I look back at Coach Taylor, giving him the nod to go ahead and call an ambulance. I'm almost certain he's torn at least one of the ligaments in his knee, and if that's the case there's not much I can do. But what I can do is provide him the emergent care he needs until he reaches the right people that can help him.

I look back at Clay, who currently looks like he may be having a panic attack. Staring

off into the void, shallow breathing, all the signs are there. I give Coach Taylor a nod in Clay's direction, letting him know that I've got Jax, and he needs to focus on Clay. The last thing I need is for Clay to hyperventilate and pass out.

Refocusing on Jax I ask, "Where's Emerson at right now?"

"In class, don't bother him with this; he'll spiral."

"Jax, we have to call someone." The concern in my voice must be abundantly clear because when his brain registers what I was just implying I almost immediately see the panic set in. Grabbing his shoulder, I lean in and whisper, "It's okay, I've got you. I'll call Emerson once we get you settled into the hospital."

I try to do my best to continue to comfort him as we wait for the paramedics to arrive, and it kills me to know that there's nothing I can do to ease his pain.

Finally, a few agonizing minutes later, the gym doors burst open, and the paramedics head toward us with a stretcher. Once they reach us, I fill them in before telling him, "I'm going to run and get your stuff out of the locker room." His eyes widen, and his hand latches onto my arm. I soften my expression as best as I can. "I'll be right back. They're going to need your ID once you get to the hospital and your phone to call your parents." He gives me a quick nod, and I spring off down the hallway leading to the locker rooms and my office.

By the time I'm back in the gym, they're picking the stretcher up, wheeling him out, and I'm in step behind them. I should be staying and making sure no one else needs me today, but Clay's panic was under control, and Coach said he was going to wrap things up and send the rest of the team home for the day. He looked at about max capacity for issues this week, and I can't say I blame him one bit.

* * *

? * Several hours later, after several exams, X-rays, and an MRI, Jax's doctor finally confirms what I knew to be true the moment I saw him.

"You have torn your ACL and have a severe sprain on your MCL," the doctor blurts out while keeping his eyes on his tablet. As if this news didn't just blow up Jax's life as he knows it. I watch as Jax's breath stills in his chest. And I give his shoulder a firm squeeze, reminding him that I'm here. Finally, the doctor looks up from his tablet at Jax. "I can do surgery tomorrow to repair the tears."

Jax asks the doctor barely above a whisper, "H-how long until I can play again?"

"Nine to twelve months," the doctor says matter-of-factly. "I'll give you a few minutes to process the news and will be back in a little bit to explain everything, okay?"

I feel his shoulder sag under my hand, and I wait for a minute until the doctor heads out the door. "I know you'll make a full recovery, Jax. That man you were talking to is one of the best in the state. He'll get everything put back together, and you'll be as good as new."

He doesn't say anything as he pulls his phone out and turns the screen so I'm able to read what it says.

Thirteen missed calls from his mom. Ten from his dad and just as many texts.

He clicks on a text from his mom that reads:

Mom

Emerson said you got hurt and you're at the hospital?! Jackson, call me please or I'm getting on the first plane out there!

“To say my parents are overprotective and overbearing would be the understatement of the century. Especially my mom. She’s a helicopter mom, to put it lightly. Not that I blame her, considering she had four boys.” He smiles and adds, “I wouldn’t trade her for the world, though. Be prepared for a video call after I send this text, though.”

Me

Do not come out here mom.

Not even three seconds after sending the text, his phone lights up with a video call from his mom. Jax slides his finger across to accept it, and she’s spouting off questions before it’s fully even connected. “—his knee. Oh, baby,” she gasps as she puts her hand to her mouth. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay, Mom.”

“Tell me what happened.” She’s holding back tears, and at this point, I think Jax is, too. I can only imagine how hard it must be to not have his parents here to support him.

Jax sighs and, with an almost detached tone, explains what happened. “I was going up for a hit, and as my foot was about to leave the ground, I heard a pop, and I was on the ground before I knew it.”

The tears are rolling down her cheeks now. “I’m booking a flight right now. We’re in the middle of a winter storm, though, so it could be a couple of days before I can get a flight out of here.” She looks past the phone at, who I’m assuming is Jackson’s dad. “Dawson, go get my suitcase.” Her eyes refocus on the screen. “Is Emerson at least there with you?”

“Do not book a flight, Mom. And no, Theo called him for me on the way here. He’s

got an exam and practice this afternoon so I told him to just come to the hospital when he was done.”

“Who’s Theo?”

“Theo is our new athletic trainer.” The way he says it feels like a punch to the gut. Athletic trainer. What I wouldn’t give to be something more than that right now. To be able to hold and comfort him. To make sure he’s okay. To be there to nurse him back to health.

But I can’t. Not now. Not ever.

“Oh, I remember him! The one that Emerson and Dom helped move into the house across the street. Emerson said you thought he was cu?—”

“Theo’s right here, Mom. Can we not?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Hi, Mrs. Baker, it’s very nice to meet you.” I wave to her as Jax puts me on screen.

I watch this adorable woman blush through the screen. “Enough with the Mrs. Baker. You’ll call me Catherine.”

“They’re planning on doing surgery tomorrow. Emerson can pick me up after my surgery and get me home. I’ll be fine. And before you ask again, please don’t come down here.”

It takes everything in me not to offer to stay here and to take him home after surgery tomorrow, but again, that would be overstepping all kinds of boundaries.

As if we haven’t crossed enough already.

“Like I said, it might not be tomorrow when I get there, but it will be sometime this week.” Jackson sighs, obviously resigning to the fact that this is a losing battle, and Catherine continues, “I have to make sure you’re okay and that you have some meals made up. Lord knows we can’t rely on Emerson to make food for you.”

“He is a dangerously bad cook, isn’t he?” He’s laughing, and that sound alone is enough to ease some of the weight on my shoulders.

“Yeah, he is... Okay, I’m going to try to rest for a little bit.”

“I love you. Call me before your surgery in the morning.”

“Love you too, Momma.” Jackson hangs up and looks over at me, a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment covering his face.

The corners of my lips turn up. “She seems sweet.”

“She is,” he answers as the two of us stare at one another.

“Mom’s coming out isn’t she?” Emerson’s voice cuts through the silence. We turn to look at him and find him leaning against the door frame.

I remove my hand from Jax’s shoulder and slide my glasses back up my nose. “Let me know if you need anything.” I look at Jax, and the hurt on his face is obvious enough you could see it from a mile away.

He nods, and I leave it at that, forcing my feet to carry me out of Jax’s orbit.

* * *

Emerson’s car pulls up in their driveway at the exact time he said they would be here,

and I'm out my door and across the street before Emerson can even get to the passenger side of the car.

He had called asking for help to get him into the house, and of course, I couldn't say no.

I open the passenger door to find a very high Jackson. "I'm one lucky bastard. Is the hot neighbor here to get me from the car? Emmy, did you do this for meeeee?"

"Ignore him; he's on pain meds." Emerson chuckles as he instructs Jax on what to do. "Come on, we've gotta get you inside." He grunts while pulling Jax's bad leg out of the car while I put my arms out to pull him up to stand.

Emerson and I get under each of his arms and hobble him inside. After way too much fussing and fighting, we finally get to the living room. Jax leans in and whispers in my ear, "This isn't how I wanted you carrying me for the first time."

"Shh, you don't know what you're saying."

His hand that's slung over my shoulder grabs the bottom of my neck and runs up into the hair on the nape of my neck, and he gives it a gentle pull. "But I do know what I'm saying..."

I can see the couch, and I'm hoping to god he stays quiet until Emerson is at least out of earshot. He's behaved as we get him on the couch with his leg propped up under a couple of pillows.

Emerson heads out of the house to grab the rest of his things from the car. Not even seconds after Emerson leaves Jax says, "Get your cock out again."

I hiss, "Jax! Please, for the love of god, stop. I came to help get you in here and make

sure you were okay. You can't be saying stuff like that." I hate shutting him down, but it wouldn't take anything for Emerson to overhear what he's saying. I'm sure I could blame it on the drug-induced haze he's in, but still.

"You just had to wear the gray joggers, didn't you, Mr. Young?" The smirk on his face has my hand covering my mouth to suppress my groan.

Before he can say anything else, I stand up straight and take a step back from the couch, creating some much needed distance. "I'm going to head out. You rest and listen to your brother."

I leave Jax, with his leg propped up, and a list of instructions for Emerson to follow. And with one last lingering look at him already asleep on the couch, I walk out his front door and back across the street.

Alone.

Again.

* ? STRAY - jxdn

CHAPTER 14

JUST ONE LOOK

JACKSON

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay with you?” Clay asks as he drops me off in front of the athletics facility.

“Don’t you have class?”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s just my Business Analytics class. I can do that shit in my sleep.”

As much as I wouldn’t mind having someone there supporting me today, I also don’t think I can think of anything worse than someone witnessing the humiliation that is about to occur.

It’s my first day of physical therapy post-surgery, which I thought was going to be further out than three fucking days post-op. However, my doctor told me that with my activity and fitness level, there should be no reason I shouldn’t heal up faster than most.

Whopty-fucking-doo.

It’s safe to say I’m absolutely dreading whatever is about to happen.

? * Be that as it may, I know Clay is just as disappointed about the entire situation as I am. Me being out our senior year has not only put everything I've worked for at risk but all of his work is at risk too. He's going to have to learn how to work with a brand new partner in hopes that their skills will be enough to not only win a championship but pull the attention of the Olympic scouts as well.

And cherry on top of the cake is that his new partner is the one person on the team that Clay can't seem to get along with.

Rocky Campos.

So, instead of making his life even harder and asking that he miss class, I give him a weak smile and say, "Thanks, man. But, I'm good."

I can tell he doesn't believe me, but he nods anyway. "Alright. I'll pick you up out here after class."

I tried to align most of my physical therapy appointments with Clay's schedule, considering I can't walk very far with my brace and crutches yet, and I'm not allowed to drive a car. I'm just thankful our school has a slew of physical therapists on staff for athletes, and Clay didn't have to schlep me across town to see someone else. I'd hate to be more of a burden than I already am. "Sounds good."

I manage to finagle my braced leg out of Clay's Mercedes-AMG CLS, which I keep telling him is a ridiculously pretentious car for a college student, but that's neither here nor there, grab my crutches and backpack, and watch as he drives away.

With my crutches under my arms, and my backpack on my back, I stare at the doors to the athletics facility. Trying my best to mentally prepare myself for the torture I'm about to endure. And as pissed off as I am about this entire situation, I know that I'll never get better, I'll never have a second chance, if I don't take the first step.

“Well,” I say to no one but me. “Today’s as good a day as any.”

* * *

“Come on, Jax. Two more.”

I’m doing simple heel slides, and I can feel beads of sweat pouring down my forehead.

I’m sweating... from doing heel slides.

How the mighty have fallen.

“I know I just met you, Chris. But I really want to punch you in the face,” I huff out as I slowly slide my leg flat against the table.

Smirking, he replies, “I have that effect more often than not.” Don’t get me wrong, Chris seems like a nice guy, but this fucking sucks, and he’s the only one here I can take it out on. “But I promise, if you being pissed at me will motivate you to heal faster, then I can take it.” Chris winks and I roll my eyes. “Alright. Last one.”

It takes every muscle I have to slide my leg back toward my ass. I can only move it a few inches, but it may as well be a mile. Even bending the joint at such a small degree feels next to impossible.

“And back down,” Chris instructs.

I do as he says and return my leg to it’s resting position, thanking god that this hour of torture is finally over.

Chris helps me sit up and put my brace back on before handing me my water bottle.

Once I'm off the brink of death, he hands me a packet of papers. I flip through it to find all of the exercises we did today. "I want you to do each of these twice a day until I see you next week."

"Twice a day. Got it."

"And remember, no weight bearing, no stairs, no driving, and always wear the brace." I sigh heavily and nod. "I'll see you back here, same time on..."

"Friday," I answer eagerly. Because as much as I hated this, I want to get better even more.

"Friday," Chris agrees before helping me get the rest of my things together.

We say our goodbyes, and I exit his office. But as his door closes behind me I see an all too familiar name on the one directly across the hall. I didn't notice it when I walked in because my eyes were zeroed in on the office of doom. But there it is. His name in big letters with the school's logo right on the door.

Theodore Young.

And as I let my eyes wander through the small window next to the door, I see him. Already staring at me.

But when I raise my hand to wave awkwardly, he doesn't wave back. In fact, he pretends like I didn't even do it at all and looks back at whatever he was doing on his computer.

Perfect .

As if I wasn't already going to be dreading these appointments, now I have to deal

with him pretending I'm not right across the hall.

Just fucking perfect.

* * *

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I stand outside of Chris' office while waiting for him to finish up with the appointment before me. I had Clay drop me off early for my Friday appointment in hopes that if I stood out here long enough Theo would actually decide to speak to me. Or maybe even wave. Hell, I'd even take a simple look in my direction. However, despite how hard I stare through the window at him, he's given me nothing.

But I know he knows I'm here because he did the same thing he did the other day. As soon as he saw me in the hall he buried his handsome fucking face in his computer screen and hasn't looked up once since.

That was twenty minutes ago.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket I find a text from my brother.

Emerson

I understand you have to sleep on the couch until you're able to use the stairs, but if you leave your shoes in the middle of the living room one more time I will cut your dick off.

Despite my sour attitude I snort a laugh. He came down in the middle of the night to get a glass of water, and I fully heard him eat shit when he tripped over my shoe. Even though I pretended not to.

Me

How bout you suck my dick.

Emerson

... I'm your brother. Don't be rude.

Me

Says the one who said he'd chop off my dick.

Emerson

Don't make me tell mom on you.

Me

Ooooo. I'm soooo scared.

Emerson

You should be.

Me

Whatever, Momma's boy.

Emerson

I'M NOT A MOMMA'S BOY!

Laughing, I pocket my phone as I hear the door to Chris' office open. A girl I know from the swim team walks out, and Chris pops his head out behind her. He pinches his brow in confusion before pointing his thumb over his shoulder. "You could have waited in one of the chairs in here."

It's a large room filled with a plethora of physical therapy equipment, including a few treadmills and stair machines. It's easily big enough to treat several patients at once. But if I'm in there I can't be out here.

And out here is where I can see Theo.

"I know. I was just talking to my brother on the phone."

He shrugs nonchalantly and picks my backpack up off the floor for me. "Come on in."

As Chris walks back into the physical therapy room, I look across the hall one more time, hoping he'll look at me. Just once. Little to my surprise... he doesn't.

* * *

If I hear him laugh into that phone one more goddamn time I'm going to send my own phone through his door.

It's been weeks... WEEKS of this bullshit, and I've just about had enough.

Enough physical therapy.

Enough watching Clay and Rocky play while I watch from the stands.

Enough of pretending I'm fine when it feels like my world is falling apart.

And enough of Theo blatantly pretending like I don't exist.

I won't deny that I'm physically healing better than anyone ever expected, but mentally... mentally I'm hanging on by a thread.

And every time Theo laughs into that phone while actively ignoring me that thread gets thinner and thinner.

I know he knows I'm out here. I've been coming to these physical therapy appointments at the exact same time, on the exact same days, for weeks.

Not once since I got hurt has he checked in on me. Despite how he was that day in the hospital and helping me into the house. It's as if he could give less than a fuck.

Some days I wish that were me. I wish I didn't care about him.

But I do. I really fucking do.

And since I haven't had volleyball to obsess over, my obsession with him has only grown tenfold.

He may not want to look at me, but I sure as hell want to look at him. Every minute of every day. And if he won't give me that, well... I guess I'll just have to take care of it myself.

* * *

Just like the night Theo and I kissed in the parking lot, it takes me all of five minutes to hack into the school's security system and access the cameras in the sports complex.

I shuffle through a couple of angles before I spot Theo in the supply room stocking his bag for this afternoon's away game. My eyes are glued to the screen. Addicted to watching him do the most mundane of tasks.

I can't make sense of any of it, and I don't want to.

So I don't move. I watch him from every angle possible until he gets on the bus and it pulls out of the parking lot. And when the team returns the following afternoon—I watch him then, too

* ? PSYCHO - HARDY

CHAPTER 15

IS THIS PURGATORY?

THEODORE

I t's Friday.

That means Jax will be here any minute to start his physical therapy with Chris. I try to suppress my eyeroll, but knowing they're in there with Chris' hands all over Jax grates on my nerves way more than it should.

And I know it shouldn't.

I know Chris is a professional unlike me when it comes to Jax. But I can't help the jealousy that eats at me anytime he's here for an appointment.

From what I've seen though, he truly seems to be healing great. Better than anyone could have hoped for or expected. He can move it a little more every day and hasn't needed his crutches for a while. He's even driving again.

Jax hasn't stopped staring into my office on his way to and from each appointment. It takes every ounce of self-control I have to not rip open my door, pull his ass into my office, and ask him what he wants from this fucking behavior. But I know that we will end up in a situation neither of us need to be in.

So I do nothing.

And ignore him.

Like always.

It guts me from the inside out to not give Jackson Baker every ounce of my attention like he deserves. However, a man like Jackson deserves someone who doesn't have pounds of baggage that comes along with him.

Someone that's his age.

Someone that's not an employee at his school.

And sure as fuck not someone that has a fiancée that he doesn't know about.

I hear a noise in the hallway, and out of habit I look away from the computer screen and out the window, not even thinking about who might be on the other side of it. What meets my eyes is a very pissed off Jax.

This is the first time I've truly allowed myself to look at him since that day in that hospital. And he looks so... so different .

The dark circles under his eyes, his forward slumped shoulders, the wrinkles lining his clothes that normally aren't there are all so unlike him. My eyes scan down the rest of his body to see if he's okay, and I notice that he has lost a bit of weight, too.

Enough weight for his clothes to be baggy on him.

I don't like it.

I hate knowing how sad and depressed he might be. And I hate even more that I'm not helping the situation. I can't take it. But right as I stand from my desk to go talk

to him, Chris walks out to greet him, and before I know it he's gone.

* * *

I got lost in making sure my schedule was lining up with all the spring sports, and the only thing that pulls me out of the litany of calendar events is the sound of my door opening.

When I look up, I watch Jax stealthily slide into my office and shut the door behind his back. And when he reaches behind him to turn the lock I can practically feel my stomach fall out of my ass.

Standing from my chair, I walk around the other side of my desk. "Jax... what are yo?—"

Reaching out, he grabs me by the front of my Palm University shirt and pulls me to him.

And I don't stop him.

His lips find mine like they always do. We're like two magnets that can never be close to one another without pushing everything in their way to the side, desperate to touch again.

The sad-sounding whimper that leaves him has me pulling away to make sure he's okay, but our lips never separate because his hands move to the back of my head, ensuring he can keep me right where he wants me.

And I let it happen... again .

I have no control when it comes to Jackson Baker. That much is clear.

And as much as I despise what feels like the little control I have over the rest of my life, relinquishing my control to him feels... so fucking right.

Which is how I know it's wrong.

"Jax... we can't?—"

? * He cuts me off, not wanting to hear the same words come from my lips. "I'm so tired of sitting outside this office like a lost puppy, hoping you'll so much as look at me. I mean you—you haven't even fucking checked on me once, Theo." He holds his hand up to halt my question he clearly sees me about to ask. "No. You're going to listen. You can't just strut into my life, flip me upside down, and expect me to go on like nothing has happened. Like you can't feel how right this is just as much as I can. I don't understand why—" He inhales a shaky breath—" I don't understand why we can't be something. I mean shit, Theo, I'm about to graduate."

Jax heaves for breath, as if that took everything in him to say to me.

"May I speak now?" He nods. "What'd you lock this door for, Jax?"

"So no one would see us."

"Don't you think that little window you've been looking through for weeks on end would allow them to do that?"

"Shit. Yeah, now that you say that... I guess I wasn't thinking. I just really—" Suddenly he stands up straighter. "Actually, I don't care. Answer my questions, Young." I don't like him calling me by my last name, well without the "Mr." in front of it, but I leave that for another day.

"I've tried to separate myself from you because this isn't something we can do, Jax.

Has it been easy? No. But do we need to stay apart for both of our best interests? Yes.”

He slowly starts to clap, and my brows pull together in question. “How you managed to say the same fucking thing you always do, is beyond me, Theo. For being thirty, you would think you had some more depth to ya, but I guess this is just you.”

My jaw may as well be lying on the fucking floor. And the look of disgust on his face feels like a vice around my heart.

I finally pull my shit together and ask, “What do you want me to say?!”

“Anything! Anything besides the same goddamn excuses that you always give me.”

We’re bound to be drawing attention at this rate, but I just keep going. “I don’t know what you want from me, Jackson!”

He’s so pissed I can see the tears lining his eyes. And I don’t blame him in the slightest. I’m a fucking mess and dragging along this poor boy for my pleasure was never the right thing to do.

He pushes my shoulders slightly, and I move away from him, giving him some more space. He whispers, “I’m leaving before those stupid fucking words come out of your mouth again. Have the day you deserve, Mr. Young.”

I deserve to spend the day in hell.

And this very well could be my hell.

Having a man I’ve quickly fallen for within reach but not being able to claim him as mine, has to be some kind of purgatory.

Isn't it?

* ? My Fault - Shaboozey, Noah Cyrus

CHAPTER 16

B&E, BOOKS, AND BLOWIES

JACKSON

It's just after four o'clock, and I'm sitting in my car in the back corner of the sports complex parking lot.

After my afternoon classes I came right back here. Not that going to those classes was even worth it because I couldn't focus on a single fucking thing the professors were saying after my fight with Theo this morning.

After I stormed out it took me all of five minutes to decide what I wanted to do.

Because despite how monumentally pissed off I am at him, I can't quit.

He's like the worst kind of drug. I know he's killing me from the inside out, but I can't wait until my next hit. And the next. And the next.

? * I always want more of him.

Which is why watching him on the cameras throughout the sports complex is no longer enough. And why the moment I see him walk in the direction of the track for their practice I exit my car and head toward the doors I go in for my appointments.

Walking as fast as my leg will allow, I make my way down the now all-to-familiar

hallway, but this time I don't go into Chris' door. Turning to the right, I reach for Theo's door handle to thankfully find it open.

I pull out a small waterproof camera from my backpack and nestle it in the snake plant on the bookshelf across from his desk.

Pulling out my phone, I ensure the camera's view isn't obstructed and the image is loading properly before I throw my backpack over my shoulders and sneak back out the door.

And once I'm back in my car, I open my laptop, clear the last ten minutes from the sport's complex's security cameras, and wait for him to return from his rounds at track and field practice.

And when he does I don't even bother driving home. Because my eyes are glued to him. My drug.

My addiction.

My ever waking desire.

But, my concentration breaks when my phone starts dinging repeatedly in my pocket, and I remember I was supposed to meet Clay and Rocky at the library to study.

Which, I can't really say I'm overly excited for, because for one... I don't need to study. I'm a genius. And two... despite their best efforts, it's abundantly clear to anyone with eyeballs that the two of them have a thing. And considering my current lovesick condition, being around a couple isn't exactly on my to do list.

But I know if I don't they won't let it be.

Clay already knows something is going on with me.

He's my best friend. He knows when I'm not okay. And I think it's safe to say I am well beyond okay.

I let myself watch Theo for a few more minutes before pocketing my phone and heading toward the library.

* * *

Throwing my bag onto the table, I take an empty seat next to my best friend and smile sarcastically at Rocky who's sitting across from Clay. "Never thought I would see you using the group chat, Rockwell."

Rocky narrows his eyes. "I use it all the time now, Jackson, don't start your shit with me." Despite our razzing one another, I don't have an issue with Rocky. He seems like a genuinely good guy, and despite their rough start, he's been a great partner for Clay. I just hope that whatever is going on between the two of them doesn't end in disaster. Because Clay deserves the world, and I'll be damned if I allow anyone to treat him as if he doesn't.

Rocky cocks his head. "And don't change the subject. Why the hell were you so late?"

Regardless of how upset I am at him, a smile lines my lips at the thought of my camera being in his office. "Unlike you two... I don't need to study. I had to install some new programs on my computer, and I got caught up watching..."

Shut. Up. Jackson.

But it's too late. Clay's attention has peaked. "Watching what, Jax?"

Shit.

“No one. It’s none of your business.”

Oh, real smooth Jackson. Since when have you ever hid a single thing from Clay?

But Rocky chimes in before Clay has a chance to. “Oh, so it’s a person?”

Fucking fuck.

I can feel Clay boring a hole in the side of my head, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. Because I know that as soon as I do, I’ll come clean about everything.

And I can’t. Not yet. Mostly because I’m honestly a little embarrassed about how I’ve been acting about this entire situation. But also because, if Clay knew what was going on I have no doubt that, despite his golden retriever demeanor, he would march right over to Theo’s house and deck him square in his perfectly chiseled jaw.

So, I say nothing. I say nothing and just let him stare at me until I hear him sigh in frustration before hastily standing from his chair. “I’m going to find the book that I need for my marketing class.”

Great. Now he’s pissed at me too.

“Jax.” The concern on Rocky’s face is evident. I’m important to Clay, which means I’m important to Rocky now too. If the people Clay loves are hurting, Rocky wants to fix it. That’s the type of guy he is. He stands up for the people in his corner. “Seriously, are you okay? Are you in some kind of trouble?” He leans forward on the table. “I can help.”

I don’t doubt that he would if he could. But unfortunately... this isn’t anything

anyone can help me with. No matter how much I want it sometimes. “I’m fine, Rocky. I promise.” Lies . “I just have some shit going on. But nothing I can’t keep an eye on.”

He can tell I’m full of shit, but he doesn’t push any further. Nodding, he stands from the table. “I’m going to help Clay find the book he needs,” he says with a wink.

I playfully roll my eyes. “Ugh, fine. Just make sure I don’t have to hear it.”

Rocky laughs before heading toward the bookshelves Clay disappeared between.

Grabbing my phone out of my pocket, I pull up the feed from Theo’s office, eager to see him. But I’m disappointed to find he’s gone, and his office is dark.

Briefly, I play with the idea of throwing my shit in my bag and heading home in hopes of catching him through his window, but then I remember that he hasn’t so much as opened his curtains an inch in over a month and a half.

So, I pocket my phone and study. I study until I spot Rocky and Clay walking back toward the table, hand in hand.

And would you look at that, not a fucking book to be found. “Didn’t find the book you needed, I see?”

Clay sits down next to me and puffs out his chest. “Nah, got a little distracted.”

See, this is exactly what I was talking about. Just a reminder of what I so desperately want but Theo won’t let me have. “You guys fucking suck.”

Snorting a laugh, Clay answers, “Yeah, he sure did.”

* ? Gone or Staying - Sleep Theory

CHAPTER 17

MISERY LOVES COMPANY

THEODORE

I 'm in my office, getting my gear packed to head out to the sand courts for Clay and Rocky's last home game before championships start, when a feminine voice that I recognize all too well echoes down the hallway.

Shit.

? * Even though I know good and well who it is, I need to see it to believe it. I pop my head out the door and look down the hall.

Bridget.

Yay fucking me.

Before I have a chance to duck back into my office and pretend to be on a phone call she spots me.

“Theodore! There you are!”

God, could she be any louder? Her goal is always to draw the most attention to us as possible, making people think we're a lot happier than we actually are. This is her first full day back from her month-long trip, and I figured that would've had her

staying home, but no, she had to come here.

Today of all days.

“Bridget. Wh-what are you doing here?” I mean that genuinely; she hardly ever comes to support anything I do, especially a sport she knows nothing about. There usually has to be some scheme or game she’s trying to play for her to show up at something like this.

A scheme like the entirety of our relationship.

I can spot the mischievous sparkle in her eyes from a mile away. I may not love her, but I do know her.

Bridget runs her hand down my chest, her obnoxiously large ring sparkling under the fluorescent lights. “I had to make sure no one here was trying to make moves on my fiancé before we finally say I do.” She says the word fiancé loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear her.

You know, considering how much she detests my career choice, she sure does like to make a show out of the fact that she’s with me.

Not only that, but she has officially started telling anyone who will listen all about our upcoming wedding. She still hasn’t set an official date, but I know it’ll be made any day now. “It’ll be the wedding of the year,” she always tells me.

Suddenly, I catch her narrowing her eyes at someone down the hallway, and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes at how fast she went from trying to brag about me, to looking at someone else. Wanting to see who has her attention, I follow her stare down the hall.

Only to find a familiar set of bright blue eyes already staring back at me.

Jackson.

Bridget must realize she's been staring at him too long because I faintly hear her sigh before saying, "Alright, well, I'm bored so I guess I'll see you at the game."

Standing on her toes, she gives me an unusual kiss on the cheek, before turning on her heels and heading in the direction of the doors right by a shocked Jax. And I still haven't managed to move a muscle.

Bridget reaches for the door to push it open but pauses and leans into Jax. "He's pretty, right? Good thing he's mine."

I swear to god I hear Jax growl at her before she pushes the door open and walks away like she didn't just blow up whatever was left between Jax and I.

Finally, I manage to get my feet to move and make up the ground between us. "Jax, let me explain."

"Please do, Mr. Young, because right now it feels like I'm in some sort of comedy skit. Is someone going to pop out and yell "punked", or is this just how fucked my life is?" If I couldn't tell how hurt he is by his humorless and hollow laugh, it's even more evident in his eyes. There's pain there like I've never seen.

That's saying something since I've already hurt this poor man more than he ever deserved.

Resigning to the fact that there's no going back, I sigh. "I'm engaged, but it's not what it seems. It?—"

“Stop right there.” He holds out his hand, cutting me off. “You mean to tell me that woman that just had her perfect little manicured hand on your chest, the one with that fucking rock on her ring finger, is-is your fiancée ?”

“Yes,” I answer softly.

“I was coming in here to tell you that I’m planning on coming back for my fifth year. That I’m going to spend next year having the final season I’ve been working so hard for. That no matter how much I want to be with you, I want that for me more. I wanted to see if you’d wait for me.” His eyes glass over, and he chokes back a sob. “But it’s obvious that was never going to happen. That I was just some little game you kept taking out of the closet, but never actually played. That I was just someone you wanted to string along.”

“That’s not true, Jax.” The fact that he even thinks that is enough to break my heart in the middle of this hallway.

“What do you mean that’s not true? How could you care about me even in the slightest, and secretly be fucking engaged?” he hisses, and I have look away from his face because it’s too much to see the hurt that’s swallowing him whole.

He fists my shirt, pulling me into him, and through gritted teeth asks, “How long?”

Our faces are inches apart, and if anyone were to see us like this I would be fucked, but I can’t find it in me to care. “Two years.”

He leans into my ear, and the disgusted tone of his voice has the hairs on the back of my neck standing up straight. “You’re a fucking asshole, Theo.”

He pushes my shoulders back right as he spots Clay coming out of the locker room down the hall.

I rush out, “Knee’s looking good, Jackson. Just keep up the conditioning, and you’ll be set for next season.” Clay rolls his eyes, clearly not buying for one second that Jax and I were just talking about his knee.

“Next season?” Clay pinches his brow in question.

Great, I just fucking told his best friend huge news that Jax should’ve had the privilege to give.

Let’s see how much more I can royally fuck up with him today.

“Yeah,” Jax murmurs. “I was going to tell you after championship week was over. I’m using my fifth-year eligibility and coming back to play next year. I have some advanced-level coding and programming classes I could take, and I just wanted one more year to play. I’m not looking to make it a career, but I just—” He inhales a deep sigh. “I just wasn’t ready to be done yet. I want one more year so I can end it my way. Ya know?”

I’m looking at the ground because what else am I supposed to be doing? I’ve made Jax’s whole senior year miserable, and now we’re going to have to repeat the entire thing all over again. I’m a pathetic human, so why not drag everyone else around me down to the depths of hell with me...

Misery loves company, right?

“That’s great, man.” Clay claps him on the shoulder. “I’m happy for you, really. You deserve to have a great final season. Just take it easy over the summer.” I look up to find Clay glaring daggers at me. “Would hate to see you get hurt. Again .”

He’s talking to Jax, but it’s clear his words are directed at me. I don’t know how he knows, but he does. And while I understand he’s being protective of his best friend,

the last thing I need is him piling on. Narrowing my eyes, I ask, “Did you need something from me, Clayton?”

“Yup.” He plasters on a fake smile. “Just need you to tape up my wrist. Tweaked it a little yesterday on a dive and figured better safe than sorry.”

Jax doesn’t look at me again and instead asks Clay, “You feel good about today?”

“Great,” he answers while still looking at me.

I look between the two of them, and despite the burning desire to stand here and finish our conversation, I know that our chance to talk is long gone.

Nodding, I turn on my heels and head back into my office as I hear Jax hiss, “Don’t, Clay. I’ve got it handled.”

* * *

I’m on the sidelines beside Coach Taylor, and at the opposite end of the bench is a fuming Jax taking stats of the game. He won’t so much as spare me a glance.

Oh, how the tables have turned .

Rocky and Clay are on the final points of the first set when I see a blonde head of hair climbing the stands on the other side of the court.

Because why the fuck not .

I pull my eyes from her and look back at Jax.

His eyes follow her as she climbs the stands one by one. If looks could kill, she’d be

falling over the railing any second now.

None of this is how I wanted him finding out about her. To be honest, I'm not sure I wanted him finding out at all. But I guess this is my karma coming to get me.

I just wish Jackson wasn't caught in the crossfire.

* ? Figure You Out - VOILà

CHAPTER 18

SLEEPING DOGS

JACKSON

“S o you guys are like all in love and shit now, huh?” I yell into Clay’s ear.

He downs another long swig of beer and smiles like a fucking god. “Yeah, man. We’re all in love and shit.”

And as annoyed as I am by the entire concept of love at this particular moment in life, I am wildly happy for my best friend.

He hasn’t had much love in his life, especially not from those who were supposed to love him most. But the family he’s found here has tried to fill that cup for him. And now that he has Rocky, it’s overflowing.

Clay deserves to have this kind of love. A love so deep and so pure it changes the very foundation of who you are.

Which is why, even in a crowded sports bar like Jack’s, the only person he has had his eye on since he got here is Rocky.

But that could also have something to do with the fact that they just won a national championship.

Champions and lovers... Wow, now I'm really jaded.

Clay must notice my facade slipping because his beaming smile dims for a moment. "Hey, you okay?"

I wave my hand at him. "I'm fine. Don't you worry about me. Go. Go and enjoy your night."

"Jax..."

"Clay, I'm fine. Really."

And because he knows me best, he knows to leave it alone. "Will I at least see you at graduation?"

I look at him with a dumbfounded expression. "I wouldn't miss your graduation for a million years."

His smile beams all over again, and he wraps me up in a giant hug before whispering in my ear. "You're going to be okay next year."

It's not a question, but a statement. Because he knows it, and I know it. A lot of shit has happened this year... to both of us. And while our outcomes may now be different, Clay knows that I've been putting in the work to make next year, my year. I'm not going to let anything or anyone take that away from me.

"I'll be okay," I say as I pat him on the back.

Clay pulls from our hug, but when he hears Rocky his eyes immediately start to wander. I can't help but laugh at the lovesick look on his face. "Would you just go over there?"

“I love you, man,” he says as he clinks his beer bottle with mine.

“I love you too. Now go.”

? * He practically skips over to where Rocky is standing as “Sweet Home Alabama” starts playing over the speakers.

Next thing I know, I’m downing J?gerbombs with Rocky’s parents and then, like I’m an underclassman all over again, I’m waking up on my bedroom floor. However, contrary to underclassman Jax, upperclassman Jax had the foresight to pass out with a giant bowl next to me, a half-empty bottle of Pedialyte, and a spilled bottle of ibuprofen.

My parents can’t say I didn’t learn anything at college.

When I finally manage to peel my body off of the floor and get the room to stop spinning, my eyes land on my open computer, which I’m almost positive I had closed before I went to the game yesterday.

Slowly, as to ensure I don’t ralph all over everything, I sit down at my desk chair and turn on the screen, and I swear to fucking god I almost die in the middle of my room when a live feed of Theo making breakfast in his kitchen fills my screen.

Holy fucking shit.

Turning around quickly, I grab the big bowl off the floor and spill my guts right into it.

So much for not throwing up.

I broke into Theo’s house when he was sleeping.

I put cameras in Theo's house.

I DRANK AND STALKED.

Immediate panic sets in as I spiral about how the fuck I'm going to get those out of his house, but I suddenly realize...

They're already in there. What's the harm in leaving them there?

Because he's driving you insane you fucking idiot.

But I'm about to be back in Montana for the entire summer, and even though the thought of seeing him in that house with her makes me want to hurl this bowl at his front fucking door, I will admit it's better than the thought of not seeing him at all.

So right then and there, I decide. What's the harm in letting sleeping dogs lie?

* ? Sweet Home Alabama - Lynyrd Skynyrd

CHAPTER 19

MONTANA.

THEODORE

It's officially summer. Graduation was just a couple of days ago, and all of the sports teams are officially done with their seasons. Even though I'm employed by the school, my job doesn't require me to be on campus during summer break unless specifically requested. And Bridget just so happens to be gone on business again so I've been enjoying some much needed me time.

To say it's been peaceful is an understatement.

? * But it doesn't take my mind off of him...

I need to find a way to explain to him my situation with Bridget, but in that same breath, what would I even say?

"I've known her since we were kids. Our parents made us get together, and I'm too much of a people pleaser to say no and stand up for myself or for anything that I want."

No, that's embarrassing. And what's more is Jax still won't give a shit. Because that does nothing to explain the fact that I didn't tell him about Bridget and led him on for over a year.

For what?

Sometimes I still don't understand why myself.

Why, so I could sit in my dream house and work my dream job and have no one to celebrate with? Bridget certainly doesn't care. The only thing my parents want is for me to quit and run their fucking vineyard. And I won't let Jackson care.

But despite how hard I pushed him away, he did care. He cared about me, despite hardly even knowing me. Despite me acting like a grade-A asshole. Despite me pushing him away at every turn.

And the worst thing is... I know if I would have let him in he would have been my biggest cheerleader.

He could have been the person I celebrated with, and the worst part is, he would have wanted to. It wouldn't have been fake or forced. He wouldn't have been by my side out of obligation. No, he would have been there because there's no place he would have rather been.

Because that's just who Jackson Baker is.

The kind of person that would celebrate a win for anyone he cares about. He would throw some kind of party just for the occasion and would love every minute of it.

And I hurt that person.

I hear what sounds like car doors opening and shutting across the street, and my feet take me to the front of my house without my brain even having to think about it. I need to see him like my body needs its next breath. But what I see is Jax loading up the trunk of his car with entirely too many bags.

And just like my feet carried me to the window, they carry me through my front door, across the street, and into Jax's driveway.

Utterly panicked, I blurt out, "Where are you going? I thought you were staying for another year?"

He side-eyes me but doesn't stop loading his bags into the car. "My whereabouts have absolutely nothing to do with you, now do they?" He sounds completely dejected. Fuck, I hate this.

"Well... No... I guess not. But?—"

"Goddamnit!" He slams a bag on the ground. "You're engaged, Theo! What do you not understand?"

I pull his arm toward me to try and get his attention, but he yanks it out of my grasp. "Jackson. If you'd just listen to me for a second. Bridget and I—We're—It's not—" I inhale a breath. "Bridget and my engagement is our?—"

He cuts me off before I can finish my thought. "This is my one chance to redo last year," he seethes. Reaching up, he tugs at his hair with both hands in frustration. "I don't need you constantly trying to ruin it for me when you have no intention of actually following through." If I could follow through, I would. I would a million times over again. But it's just not possible. At least not in this lifetime. "Theo..." his voice wobbles as he says my name, and the sound alone feels like a dagger in my heart. "I have spent the last few weeks going over every detail in my head over and over and over again. Asking myself 'Why didn't you just leave him alone, Jax?' 'How did you not spot the signs, Jax?' 'Maybe if I hadn't been so distracted by the thought of you would I have even gotten hurt in the first place?' 'How did I never, not once, see that woman come in and out of your house?' 'Was it because I was too focused on constantly looking at you?' " A lone tear rolls down his cheek, but he's

quick to wipe it away.

My hand moves to reach for him, but I stop myself. “Jackson... I wish I could take back hurting you. My god do I wish I could take back hurting you. But...” I know what I’m about to say might get me punched in the face, but I’m going to say it anyway. “I wouldn’t take back meeting you at that party. I wouldn’t take back kissing you that night on the porch. Because, that would mean we wouldn’t have happened, and that thought alone—” Now my voice is the one that wobbles. “That thought alone feels like someone gutting me. But I hate seeing you like this, so please , tell me what I can do to fix it?”

“Not seeing me. That’s what you can do.” My brows pull together, and he continues. “I’m going back to Montana for the rest of summer. Some work on the ranch will do my body and my mind some good.”

Montana.

For the rest of the summer.

There’s no way I can go that long without seeing him.

“H-how will I know you’re okay?”

As he loads his last bag into the trunk, he whispers, “You won’t.”

“Jax, please give me something here.” I’m begging, and I don’t care how pathetic it makes me sound.

He spins to look at me. “Why should I give you anything when you gave me nothing . I need to find myself again. To try and remember who I was before this bullshit of a year started, and you clearly need to work out whatever the hell is going on in that

home over there with the woman wearing your ring.”

Jax closes the trunk and walks to the driver’s side of the car, clearly not wanting to hear another word from me. So I mumble to no one but myself, “It’s not my ring.”

He gets in his car, starts it, and rolls the window down. “Figure yourself out, and I’ll do the same, Mr. Young. ” He tips his ball cap down like a cowboy would his hat and says out the window, “Have a nice summer.”

* ? Swim - Chase Atlantic

CHAPTER 20

JUST ME AND MY LADY

JACKSON

“J ax, can you go put Penny and Lady back in the barn for the night?” Dad asks from his crouched position. One of the gates busted this afternoon so he’s fixing the latch on it before we head in for the night.

? * I look up at the sky. “It’s not supposed to storm, is it?”

“Nah, but I need Frank in the south pasture tonight watching the herd until we bring them in tomorrow. Last thing I need is some wolves getting at our girls because he’s not here to watch them.”

In case you were confused, Penny and Lady are mine and Dad’s horses, and Frank is our Great Pyrenees. He’s a livestock guardian dog who spends the majority of his life with either the cows or the horses, except for when Mom convinces him to come relax with her on the porch on Sunday mornings before church. He’s also got an impressive tally under his belt. Killed more wolves than any other livestock guardian dog I know.

“You want me to just wait until you’re done?” As good of shape as Dawson Baker is in, it’s a decent walk back to the house, and he’s no spring chicken.

Dad side-eyes me and laughs. “I’m good.” He looks around him. “Looks like it’s

shaping up to be the perfect summer night. A nice walk would do me some good.” Dad rubs at his belly. “Your mother would probably agree.”

I snort a laugh. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with the bowl of ice cream every night before bed or the cinnamon rolls with a pound of icing she makes you for breakfast.”

Narrowing his eyes he points his finger at me. “The only reason this ranch has survived this long is because of those cinnamon rolls.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “Oh, I don’t doubt it for a second.” I grab Penny’s lead and hop up on Lady. “Call me if you need me.”

Mumbling under his breath, he waves me off and goes back to fixing the gate. Lady and I lead Penny back to the barn at a relaxed pace. We could easily trot back, even with me holding Penny’s lead in one hand, but Dad’s right. It is shaping up to be the perfect summer night.

The Montana summer night that tourists dream of seeing at least once in their life.

The kind that I’ve been lucky enough to have spent countless hours running outside in, as a kid.

The kind that I laid under the stars with Katie James freshman year of high school while we held hands.

As Penny, Lady, and I come to the top of the hill behind the barn, I stop and take a moment to look around. My youngest brothers, the twins, Bryson and Grayson are doing the nightly farm chores, I can smell Mom’s dinner floating through the open kitchen window, the dogs are chasing around a couple of barn cats, and the evening sun is well on its way to painting the perfect picture in the sky. The pinks and oranges the perfect backdrop to the pristine mountain range.

Inhaling a deep breath, I take it all in.

I could have stayed in Pensacola for the summer; I didn't need to come home and work. But I knew in my soul this was exactly what I needed. I was lost and I knew these people, my family, and this place, could help me find myself again. And when I called Mom and Dad a few days before I left to ask if it was okay, Mom basically sprinted upstairs to get my room ready before the phone call was even over.

I've been home for a few weeks now, and I have loved every minute of it. Don't get me wrong, it's hard work, and there are some mornings I wake up and my knee feels stiffer than ever. But the second my ass hits Lady's saddle for our morning ride, everything else just fades into the background.

There's no busted up knee. No stressing about going back to school for another year. No thinking about who my new doubles partner is going to be. No wondering what I'm going to do after college. And most importantly, no him.

It's just me, Lady, and the mountain air.

For the first time in almost a year, my mind is... clear.

One of the dogs barking in the distance pulls me out of my day dream, and I start to walk Lady and Penny down the hill. Once I get to the barn I hop off Lady and start undoing both their saddles and get them ready to go in the barn for the night.

"Where's Dad?" Grayson asks.

"Still fixing the fence. Said he'd walk back when he's done."

Bryson's eyes light up. "Mom's almost got dinner ready. If we can beat Dad inside we could pick the first steak."

“Ha. You and I both know Mom is just going to set it aside for him,” I tell the twins.

Bryson rolls his eyes. “Yeah, you’re right. They’re so in love it really grosses me out sometimes.”

He’s not wrong. The love my parents have for one another is something very few people find in their lifetimes. It’s a kind of love I’ve seen only a handful of times. In my parents. In Rocky’s parents. And now... between Clay and Rocky.

It’s a kind of love I always dreamt of having. A kind of love I know my parents would give anything for me to have. For any of their sons to have.

A love that I find myself craving more and more every day.

And that thought lingers with me as I put the horses away and walk back to the house behind the twins. Was it my desire to find a love like that, that clouded my judgment? Was the glimmer of hope all I needed to obsess over a man who was so clearly not good for me?

Maybe it’s also why, despite not speaking to him once since I left school, regardless of his many attempts to text and call me, I still find myself religiously checking those damn cameras. Every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to bed.

I will admit, as unhealthy as my new little habit may be, I have learned quite a bit about he who shall not be named . I’ve learned that he drinks his coffee black. He watches New Girl and The Office episodes on repeat. He eats stovetop popcorn at least twice a week. And most importantly, whatever is going on between him and Bridget is clearly not built out of love. When she’s home, which appears to be rarely, the two of them hardly talk, let alone touch. And even though I don’t have a camera in their bedroom, which I’m both kicking myself for and partly grateful, I think it’s safe to assume they don’t have sex.

I don't know what is going on between them or why they're even together, but I can confidently say, I don't care.

Or... at least I'm starting not to.

"Boys! Don't you dare, that's your father's, and you know it." My mom's voice sounds through the screen door as I make my way up the front porch. "You haven't even washed your hands!"

Laughing, I push through the screen door and toe off my boots. I set them by my family's and hang my Stetson hat on one of the hooks next to the door.

When I round the corner I spot Mom trying to hide her smile as tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum fight over who gets to use the sink first, as if it's not big enough for them to both use at the same time. When she spots me her smile only grows. "Hey, Baby," she says.

"Hey, Momma," I answer before kissing her cheek.

The twins are still shoving and she rolls her eyes. "I swear, you and Emerson were never this ridiculous when you were sixteen."

I chuckle softly. "We were also not twins."

"Fair point," she answers with a wink. "Your father gonna be back soon?"

"Yeah, he was just finishing up. Said he wanted to take a walk."

She scoffs. "He could use it too."

"He said you'd say something like that."

A blush crawls over her cheek. “Why don’t you get cleaned up. Dinner will be ready in a few.”

“Thanks, Momma.” I kiss her other cheek and move to go up stairs, but she grabs my arm.

“I’m happy you’re home, Baby.”

“I’m happy to be home.” I shoot her a wink before heading up to my room. And when I’m standing in front of my bathroom mirror, and I see my tan skin, dirt on my face, and a genuine and true smile staring back at me, I know that statement rings truer than it ever has.

* ? Hey Driver - (feat. The War and Treaty) - Zach Bryan, The War and Treaty

CHAPTER 21

FAMILY MATTERS

JACKSON

“I really wish your brother could have come home longer. It was nice having all four of you here for a while,” Mom says as she sits on my bed while I pack my bag. ? * Every time I put a piece of clothing in, she takes it out, refolds it, and puts it back.

Emerson only came home for a few weeks at the beginning of August. He got an internship in Pensacola this summer to work at a newspaper and didn’t want to pass up the opportunity. They allowed each of the interns to take off for two weeks over the summer to give them each a chance to visit family before the school year started back up. It was like someone sawed off my mother’s arm the second he drove out of the driveway.

“What? Me, Bryson, and Grayson aren’t enough? We all know he’s your favorite, Mom.” I’m only poking fun, but her mouth opens in shock.

“Jackson James Baker!” She throws the shirt in her hand at me, and I tip my head back in laughter. “I love you all equally. Just... in different ways.”

“That’s what parents say when they have a favorite.” She rolls her eyes, and I ball up the shirt she threw at my head and put it back in my open suitcase.

She, of course, takes it out and refolds it.

Patting the bed next to her, she says, “Why don’t you come sit next to me for a minute?”

I’ve seen that look on her face a million times, and I know I don’t have the option to say no. She’s about to give me one of her famous “talks.” Relenting, I make myself comfortable on the bed next to her. “How are you feeling about this year?”

“Honestly, I feel good. I’m excited to be able to play, and my knee feels better than ever.”

She chuckles softly. “Your dad really put you to work this summer, didn’t he?”

I shrug. “It’s okay. It was the best form of rehab. I needed it.”

“And school? You think you’ll do okay with these classes? I know they’re pretty difficult?”

“Mom.” I give her my best “don’t be ridiculous” face. “You know I have never had an issue with school. I could probably teach most of my classes.”

She rolls her eyes dramatically, but she knows I’m not wrong. It may sound cocky, but I’m the smartest person I know.

And I don’t even mean to be a douche when I say that.

It’s just facts.

Mom’s face softens, and she reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from my forehead. We all have the same hair color as Dad; she’s always loved playing with it. Our eyes though, they’re all hers. “You look good, Baby.”

“I feel good, Mom.”

Her eyes search mine for a moment before she says, “You didn’t when you got here.”

I knew she noticed. Dad did too. There’s no use in denying it. “I know.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

I think about it for a moment. I think about how good it would feel to tell her everything, and for her to tell me everything is going to be okay and wrap me up in her arms. But, I know it would only upset her. And for the first time in months... I know everything is going to be okay. I feel good. I feel like myself. And it’s because of this place. Because of them. My family. So, I just smile and shake my head. “No. I’m okay, Mom. Really. I promise.”

She studies my face for a second, trying to decipher if I’m telling the truth or not. Taking me for my word she places her palm on my face and strokes the pad of her thumb along my cheekbone. “Alright, Baby.” Leaning forward, she kisses my forehead softly.

Suddenly, tears sting at my eyes, and I have to close them for a split second. Because I realize that, while I may not have the love of a romantic partner, I do have a deep and profound love. It’s in them. In my mom, my dad, and even my brothers. Nothing could ever compare to the love I have for them. It’s a love not all families have. Hell, I’ve seen a family firsthand that doesn’t have an ounce of what we have, and it has tormented my best friend for most of his life. So, while I may crave the love of a partner, I know that this will always be here waiting for me.

Mom looks at me a moment longer before clapping her hands together. “Alright, let’s get the rest of this packed up.”

“I’d be done by now if you’d stop refolding everything.”

“Don’t you start,” she says with a wink, and we both go about packing up my things.

Half an hour later, all of my clothes, and hopes for next year, are packed into my bags and loaded into Dad’s truck.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner, Baby?” We hear a shout followed by what sounds like a herd of elephants coming down the stairs. Mom turns around, and I look over her head to find the twins sprinting for the front door.

“Mom!” Bryson shouts. “Tell Grayson he can’t go out with Jessie!”

“It’s not my fault she asked me out first. Maybe next time you’ll grow some balls and?—”

“Boys!” Mom claps her hands at them.

“Who is Jessie?” I ask only loud enough for Mom to hear.

She sighs in exhaustion. “A girl in the class above them.”

“Oooo, upperclassman. Nice.”

I high-five both of them over Mom’s head, and she backhands me in the stomach.

“Don’t encourage them. Are you sure you can’t just stay here and help me deal with these two? I don’t know if I’ll make it until they go to college.”

“Hey!” Grayson groans.

“If they go to college,” I mumble under my breath.

“Hey!” Bryson repeats.

I laugh and look at my brothers. “Look, as much as it sucks, if she asked Grayson out first he has every right to go with her.” A smug look crosses Grayson’s face. “But, if you knew Bryson liked her and you said yes anyway that’s something you’re going to have to deal with.” Bryson crosses his arms and looks over at Grayson. “Buuuuut, if you wanted to ask her out you should have. Don’t punish him because you were a chickenshit.”

The two of them stare at me for what feels like an eternity before sighing heavily and storming away. Not even bothering to tell me goodbye.

Mom laughs and faces me. “They’ll figure it out,” I tell her with a smile.

“They might just destroy my house in the process,” she groans as Dad walks in the front door.

“Alright, let’s get a move on. I wanna be back for supper. Mom’s making meatloaf.”

“Not again,” the twins moan in unison from the living room.

Mom rolls her eyes. Again. I kiss her on the cheek one last time. “I love you, Momma.”

“I love you too, Baby. Fly safe and text me when you get to the airport.”

“I will.” I smile at her and follow Dad out the front door.

“And when you land,” she yells through the screen.

I round the truck and yell back, “I will.”

“Oh, and when you get to your house!”

“Mom,” I say with a laugh.

“Honey,” Dad says through the driver’s side window. “Would you let your poor boy get in the truck?”

“Yes, right. I love you.”

I climb into the truck and look out Dad’s window. “I love you too,” we say in perfect unison before driving away.

“You might as well just give her a play-by-play until you go to sleep tonight,” Dad says as we pull out of the driveway.

I look out of my window as we pass the ranch and smile to myself, feeling both excited and ready to get this year started, and sad at the thought of leaving home. But how lucky am I to have a home that I feel sad to leave. So I repeat the same words I told Mom, “I will.”

* * *

“Emerson,” I groan as I close the fridge. “Do we not have any food in this entire house?”

I’ve been traveling all day, and I’m fucking starving.

He doesn’t stop whatever article he’s writing on his laptop. He just shrugs and says, “I’ve either been at work or I’ve been at Dom’s. I’ve barely been here all summer.”

Should have figured .

“Fine. I’ll go to the store tomorrow. Write a list of what you want,” I tell him as I walk through the living room.

“Got it,” he replies. Again, not looking up from his computer.

As I walk past him I reach down and hit the spacebar a bunch of times on his laptop, and he slaps my hand away. “Would you fuck off?”

Laughing, I bend over and give him an obnoxious wet kiss on the top of his head. “God, I missed you.”

“Jackson,” he seethes, and I laugh all the way upstairs.

It’s only when I get to my room that I realize, not once did I look out the front window and across the street.

And that in itself feels... really fucking nice.

* ? You're Gonna Go Far - Noah Kahan

CHAPTER 22

A SPRING WEDDING?

THEODORE

“Come on, Mom, we’re going to be late!” This woman knows I can’t stand to be late anywhere I go, but she insists on waiting to “put her face on” until the last minute.

She’s always called it that, “putting her face on.” And every time I think of it I chuckle at the thought of little me having no clue what that really meant and then telling my teacher that my mommy takes her face off at night, and that’s why she has to put it on in the morning.

Don’t get me wrong, I love her, and she’s one of the most beautiful women I know, but I also don’t think she’s ever been on time for anything in her life.

“Here I am! Let’s go,” she rushes out while coming down the stairs of my childhood home. It’s an old farmhouse that’s been in our family for generations, and while my parents have renovated a good portion of it, you can still hear the floors creak every time you walk. It made it impossible to sneak out as a kid, but now... now every time I hear the sound it brings me back to a simpler time in my life. And I love it.

I’ve been visiting my parents back in Virginia for the last week of my “summer break.” It’s not as long as the students’, but I don’t really need it to be. I usually get antsy when I have nothing to do. My mind tends to wander. And as of late, that’s more dangerous than ever. So, I figured why not trade the Florida humidity for an

even more stifling Virginia summer.

“You know you’re supposed to tell her thirty minutes before the actual time of when we need to leave.” My dad playfully smacks my stomach and adds, “I think you’ve been gone too long, Son... You’ve forgotten the rules.”

I chuckle, but he’s right. It’s been too long. Regardless of this nagging voice in the back of my head, the one that tells me I’m always letting my family down, I find myself constantly missing them. “This dinner’s at the same time every year, Dad. She knows what time we have to be there.”

For as long as I can remember, we’ve had this long-standing invite to the Koches’ family house for the end of the summer dinner.

? * Bridget’s parents’ house.

It’s surprisingly not how you would imagine two extremely well-off families would ever act at dinner. There are no crystal champagne flutes, no caviar, no butlers serving dinner. It’s actually all very casual. And, without fail, it always seems to burn Bridget’s ass that her parents aren’t more pompous.

But, as much as her spoiled attitude grates on her parents’ nerves, and as much as I love them, they only have themselves to blame.

For Bridget’s entire life, she’s gotten everything she wanted handed to her, and then some. Not to mention, her parents weren’t exactly around much to discipline her even if they would have wanted to. I’ll give them credit where it’s due; they threw everything into creating the business they have today, but they gave up raising their daughter in the meantime. And let’s face it: a hired nanny can only do so much.

The only kickback I’ve ever received from my parents is my dad’s slightly back-

handed comments about me one day taking over the family business. I think he gets worried about not keeping the vineyard in the family, but I've also never told him that I wanted it. So, I do what I do best.

Ignore it.

Like everything else in my life.

Bridget got in today from working another brand trip and had a car drive her out to her parents. I have no doubt she's been lounging by the pool since she arrived.

My parents and I hop into the golf cart and head down the road to Koches' house. It's about a five-minute golf-cart ride just to get down our long driveway, up the road, and back down theirs. I spend the time doom-scrolling my social media apps looking for any trace of Jax.

And just like every day since he left me standing in his driveway, I don't see a fucking thing.

I pocket my phone as we're approaching the house and take a deep breath to prepare for the show I'm about to have to put on.

They knew me before the engagement, obviously, but hiding my disdain for Bridget is getting harder and harder. And she only seems to be getting harder to deal with. Maybe her mom will finally notice her attitude and say something to her.

A man can only hope.

I hear the snarl in my fiancée's voice before we even enter the Koches' kitchen. "Father, you really should remodel again. This kitchen is looking so dreary."

“Pumpkin, we remodeled the kitchen not even ten years ago. Your mother loves this kitchen. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Her dad has the patience of a saint when it comes to her. Which again... has only coddled the problem.

“It’s all so outdated.” She hears us enter the kitchen and turns around with her practiced smile plastered on her face. “Carol, Ronald, so nice to see you both. It’s been way too long.” Bridget rushes over to give my mom a hug.

“Oh, you look so good, Bridget. How’s everything been? How are you liking Florida?”

“Work has been so good. I just got promoted, again . Florida is hot and nasty, but what can you do?” She waves her hand absentmindedly. The promotion is news to me, though. But I don’t outwardly react. We don’t really talk enough to share news like that, anyway.

Bridget’s dad yells across the kitchen, shaking me from my thoughts. “Theo, my boy! I didn’t even see you sneak in! How are you?”

I give him the bright smile he deserves and tell him, “I’m doing good. Really good.” It’s only a little bit of a lie... right?

We all bullshit and mill around the kitchen, grazing on a huge charcuterie board, and I can feel her parents’ eyes on me, but I don’t make any effort to move or even acknowledge the tension between Bridget and me.

When we finally sit down at the table for dinner, it’s like Bridget’s mom is on the verge of popping with how fast she asks, “Have we set a date yet for the wedding, Bridget?”

Bridget looks at me, and all I do is shrug. I’ve told her I want nothing to do with

planning this thing. Shit, I don't even want to be the groom in it, but here I am going along with some life-long plan other people have created for me.

"I'm thinking I want a spring wedding." She holds her hand out with the obnoxiously-big ring on it, waiting for me to take her hand in mine. With all of our parents staring, I reluctantly oblige. "What do you think, Honey? Do you think you can wait that long to marry me?"

"Somehow I'll manage," I answer softly.

I could wait forever to marry her because I don't want to be marrying her.

The only person I would even consider marrying is thousands of miles away from me, and is actively pissed the hell off at me.

"Spring wedding it is then. Shelby said she's going to have it all planned, and Father"—his eyes grow wide—"I've already talked to her about some of the things I was thinking, and she told me to expect it to be around a hundred."

He practically spits his wine out. "Grand?!"

I swear my mom gasps, but she manages to cover up the sound.

"Yes. The guest list alone is going to be five hundred people, and I will not have a buffet at my wedding, so the catering bill alone will eat up a good portion of the budget. And then there's the dress." Hearts practically bounce out of her eyes at the mention of a wedding dress, despite the fact that her parents look like they might throw up.

"O-okay, well..." Ronald sounds like he can't breathe. "Well, we may have to discuss this and cut the guest list down if you're wanting it to be this extravagant."

She sits back in her seat, crosses her arms, and begins to pout like a toddler that didn't get a toy at the store. And everyone lets her.

“Well, I didn't know my question would open that big of a can of worms...”
Bridget's mom laughs, trying to diffuse the tension, and I take that as my cue to down my whole glass of wine and promptly fill it back up well above the acceptable fill line.

The disdain in Bridget's eyes as she watches me down this second glass is clear to anyone watching us interact. Still, this marriage is nothing but an expensive business transaction to most people at this table.

She leans over and whispers to me, “I know you have to drink to tolerate me, but this is embarrassing.”

I raise my eyebrows in question and whisper back to her, “Coming from the one embarrassing both of us.”

When we both pull away from one another, each set of parents' eyes are on us. My mom looks concerned, and my dad just looks lost. Her parents are seeing for the first time how badly she treats me and that my capacity to tolerate it is about at zero.

* * *

Bridget and I flew the red-eye and got back to Pensacola late last night. I'll admit, I downed too many bourbons on the plane and am feeling both the exhaustion and my hangover this morning.

I start back at the school tomorrow with the women's volleyball team's first practice of the season in the morning and football practice in the afternoon. Knowing I'll want to pack a lunch and possibly a dinner, I decide now is as good of a time as any to go

to the grocery store.

I stop to get a coffee on my way, hoping it'll work some kind of a miracle on my body.

It doesn't.

And when I walk into the local grocery store, I stop in my tracks about two aisles in when I see a familiar head of messy black hair. Even though it's just the back of him, I'd recognize that tall, lean body anywhere.

Jackson.

I haven't seen him in months. But I've dreamt about him. Over and over again.

His legs are stretching his already-tight shorts to the max. Thankfully, he has a cut-off T-shirt on, or the defined muscles on his arms might have ripped them right off. Don't get me wrong, he's always been in good shape, but this... this is on a whole other level.

And that tan... my god that tan.

It's been so long since I've seen him, and I truly don't know how he's going to react to seeing me. He didn't want anything to do with me when he left, he made that abundantly clear.

But before I can debate running from the store, he spins on his heel, and the eyes that I've missed so much lock with mine. I don't think I've ever felt as vulnerable as I do in this very moment.

"Theo?"

I take a couple hesitant steps forward. Allowing both our carts to keep the distance between us. “Y-you look so good. Montana must have treated you well.” Fuck, the light that’s been missing in his eyes is back, and seeing it makes me so happy. But, I feel equally as sad because I’m the one that dimmed that light in the first place

I’m the one that made him run.

I’m the one that fucked him up so bad he had to hide in Montana all summer.

I’m the one that lied. Again and again.

It all leads back to me.

But despite all of that, he smiles at me. “Yeah, it did, didn’t it?”

* ? fake love don’t last (feat. iann dior) - mgk, iann dior

CHAPTER 23

AWKWARD ON AISLE TWO

JACKSON

Theo looks like shit.

I mean, he's as handsome as he's ever been but...

He looks like shit.

And I'd be a dirty fucking liar if I said there wasn't some perverse part of me that was glad to see him looking so terrible.

But I'd also be a liar if I said looking into his eyes didn't make me want to... well, be me.

I'm not a spiteful person. I don't enjoy going out of my way to be hateful toward others. It's not who I am, and it's not who I want to be. Which is why I say, "Listen, Theo..." His eyes widen as I play with the handle of my shopping cart. "Let's just forget everything that happened last year, okay? I'm finally feeling like myself, and we're obviously going to be seeing a lot of each other. It doesn't pay to try to avoid one another." A flash of disappointment crosses his face. "We can be amicable, right?"

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his ears. "Right."

“Good.” I smile back at him. “So, we’re having our annual back-to-school party tonight. And if you’re not busy feel free to?—”

He shakes his head. “I’m good. But thanks for asking, though.” Gesturing to his cart he adds, “Gotta meal prep. Busy day tomorrow.”

Thank god.

“Right. Well, I’ll see you around?”

His eyes search mine, and it takes all of me to not get lost in them. “Yeah. See you around, Jax.”

With that, he turns his cart and walks away. And when I don’t follow after him, I can’t help but pat myself on the back.

Good job, Jax. Good job.

CHAPTER 24

SKULL MASK 2.0

THEODORE

The stupid fucking skull mask has been mocking me from my underwear drawer all week. Hell, it has been in there for practically a year now, and the only reason I keep it there is some kind of self-sabotage. But as it vexes me, it makes every memory come rushing back. The memory of running through the woods and my cock shoved down Jax's throat right where it belongs.

It's the night my mind always finds its way back to when I let myself daydream, usually with my cock in my hands in the shower, or the nights when Bridget's gone and the house is quiet.

It's always that damn Halloween party.

Turning down the back-to-school party invite was easy; that may have been the night Jax and I shared our first kiss, but Halloween changed everything. And that very same party is this weekend. The entire thing crept up on me, again, until Jax's text popped up on my phone a few days ago.

Jax

Halloween weekend is coming...

The party is on Saturday night if you want to come. You can even bring Bridget, it'll be fun.

Gotta invite the neighbors so the cops don't get called

My eyes have been going back and forth between that message and the mask sitting in my drawer. The fact that he's even willing to invite me and trying to be amicable about this entire thing proves how good of a man he truly is. Better than I could ever hope to be.

Me

Marg better be there

Jax

It's past her bedtime when we throw parties, or she'd be there.

She shut the last day party we had down.

Emerson and I had to practically carry her over to her house.

Me

She parties harder than me, it sounds like.

Bridget might go out of town on business. Maybe I could come.

No response.

Left on read.

For almost a week.

And rightfully so.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Why did I say that?

I've been doing so well keeping things very professional between Jax and I, but the Halloween party brought up the past in one fell swoop, every feeling, every memory, every desire came rising to the surface.

? * I can't do this.

Slamming my drawer closed, I pocket my phone and do my best to push the thoughts of the party aside.

Why can't college students just go trick-or-treating?

* * *

Avoidance didn't work. Like, at all.

It's Saturday.

And I still haven't decided...

The mask has now made its way out of the drawer and is sitting on top of my dresser, mocking me even more than it was, if that's even possible. The sun has just set, but there are already partygoers piling into the Baker house, as per usual.

It's still eating at me that Jax still doesn't know the circumstances surrounding my engagement. That everyone else in our families wants it more than I do. That I would quite literally break off the entire thing tomorrow if it didn't mean disappointing everyone I care about. Again.

Him possibly thinking that I'm a cheater makes me physically sick. But when it boils down to it, I guess... I guess I technically am.

The thought of him thinking that puts my body in motion.

I slowly start getting dressed in the same "costume" that I had on last year.

Black cargo pants.

Black long-sleeved athletic shirt.

My all-black running shoes.

And lastly, the fucking mask.

I look in the mirror above the dresser and nod to myself. Twisting my wrist so my watch face flicks to life to show me the time, I say to no one but myself, "Fuck it."

What else have I got to lose, right? Only my job, the respect of my parents, my engagement, and the last bit of dignity I have left. No big deal.

The feeling of Deja Vu is strong as I retrace my steps from last year. I exit my house using the back door, careful to not be seen by students standing out on the street. But instead of getting to Jax's backyard, I stop dead in my tracks when an all too familiar voice rings out from the wicker chair on the front porch. "You lost, Mr. Young?"

Immediately, I realize my error in judgment.

Good idea wearing the same fucking costume, Theo.

Jax is in the chair in what looks to me like some sort of Indiana Jones costume, and I can't take my eyes off of his chest through the open buttons. Trying to maintain a modicum of composure, I steel my spine. "Not at all, Mr. Baker."

"I guess your fiancée wound up going out of town after all, since you're here on my porch with that mask on."

Despite my efforts, a heavy sigh falls from my mouth. "You could've responded to my text..."

"I could've... but I didn't, did I, Theo?"

Okaaaaaay.

I nod because I know the game he wants to play. He doesn't want to be the one giving in to me. He wants to be friendly . Amicable.

And if I was being a true "friend" I would turn around right now and go back to my house. I should leave this poor man alone. I've done enough. The last thing I need to be doing is standing in front of him, daydreaming about his lips being on mine. Because despite how friendly we have been, when it comes to him, I'm a lost cause.

* ? Fake - I Prevail

CHAPTER 25

FUCK FRIENDLY

JACKSON

“Fine,” Theo bites out as he takes one step toward me.

I don’t shift in my chair despite how anxious his close proximity is making me. But then he takes another step, and another, and another, until the toes of his shoes are touching mine, and I’m forced to look up at him in that fucking mask.

I don’t know why in the flying fuck I invited him to this party. Actually, yes I do. Because I’m trying to be me . I’m trying to pretend like none of what has happened between us actually happened. I’m trying to move forward. To make this year my bitch. And I have been. I have a new doubles partner, and he’s actually really good, and we get along great. I’m kicking ass in all my advanced-level classes. I’m feeling stronger than I ever have. And I even have a few companies trying to recruit me for jobs once I graduate in the spring. But most importantly, every time I have seen or had an interaction with Theodore Young, my composure has remained intact.

But as soon as he walked across the street in that costume, I felt my composure crumble. Because, yes, I did invite him. And yes, that was idiotic of me. But how dare he.

How dare he actually show up.

How dare he wear that mask.

And how dare he question how I react toward his advances.

Then, when he leans forward, puts his hands on the arms of my chair and utters, “We don’t have to talk. We don’t have to be friendly. But we can play a game.” I’ve never wanted to deck him in the fucking mouth more than I do at this moment.

Not even when I found out about her .

Fuck being friendly.

But we can play a game alright.

I swallow harshly as he reaches up and wraps his hand around the rope I have slung over my shoulder, and my breath hitches slightly as my eyes zero in on the veins across the back of his hands.

I’ve felt those hands.

I’ve dreamt about those hands.

I’ve—

Fucking focus, Jackson.

Looking up at him, trying not to notice how close our faces are to one another despite his mask, I fake a smile and narrow my eyes. ? * “You know what? Sure, Theo. Let’s play a game.”

* ? Moonlight - Chase Atlantic

CHAPTER 26

RUN... AGAIN.

THEODORE

“Run,” Jax snarls, and, in a flash, he’s out of his seat, face-to-face with me. It takes me looking at his face for all of half of a second to realize I’ve fucked up.

Spinning on my heel, I take off in a full sprint around the house and through the backyard, dodging and spinning around heavily intoxicated college kids with cups of god knows what in them. And as my feet find purchase step after step, I find myself worrying about Jax’s knee...

But I tell myself that he’s been cleared to play, and nothing can be worse than putting his knee through a game. A simple stroll through the woods shouldn’t be an issue, right ?

As we reach the woodline, I can hear his footsteps way closer than I would like them to be.

I guess that answers my question. His knee seems to be in tip-top shape. I pick up my speed, trying to get some space between us.

Between pants, Jax grits out, “You better pick it up, Mr. Young.”

“When did you get so fast?” I ask, not bothering to turn around and risk slowing

down.

“Is the old age getting to you?” I hear him jump over the same branch I nearly just tripped over. “Or do you want to be caught?”

Do I?

Sure, I want to see what he has planned for me.

But, what’s he going to do?

How far is he willing to go?

Right as the dirty thoughts start running through my head, I feel his breath so close I can practically feel it ghost the back of my neck. He’s on my heels. Literally. Jax steps on the back of my shoes, which causes me to fall forward, hurtling toward the ground. I manage to get my hand out in front of me and roll into the fall slightly, careful not to actually hurt myself and end up in the hospital.

This is why health care providers hate Halloween, isn’t it?

Rolling over, I look up to find Jax standing above me with his arms crossed, looking down at me like I’m a pile of trash—pure hatred lining his features.

“You really thought this”—he points his finger up and down my body while snarling—“was going to be enough for me to start this all over again? That one look at you in this costume would be enough to throw away all of the work I did over the summer? That somehow this-this little game would be enough to make me forget?”

Gasping for breath, I lay on the ground, watching his chest rise and fall with each breath. Except he’s not breathing heavily because he’s out of shape. No—he’s

absolutely fucking livid. As much as I regret what my answer is about to be, I know there's no use in denying it. Lying is how we got here in the first place. Relenting, I sigh heavily. "Yeah..."

"Too bad. It's not." His eyes run up and down my lying form again, and the embarrassment that's coursing through my veins should be enough for me to get up and take my sorry ass back across the street. But it's not...

Do I have a humiliation kink or something? I'm starting to think I might, because what sane person acts like this?

"What do?—"

He cuts me off. "Nope. I've heard enough, Theo. You. Have. A. Fiancée. You're getting fucking married." The words sound like poison on his tongue. "Why are you doing this? Why do you insist on continuously trying to fuck with me and my life?"

I sit on his words for a minute, not wanting to say something I don't mean, but he takes my silence as me having nothing to say. "You're fucking pathetic, Theo. Go home and leave me alone."

Without so much as another breath in my direction, Jackson heads back toward his house, and I tuck my tail and start my way toward the road, all while scolding myself about how much of a dumbass I am for not doing right by him. Especially when he's doing everything he can to do right by himself.

"You're fucking pathetic, Theo."

Everytime I think of his words it feels like a razor to my skin.

But I don't disagree.

I am pathetic.

Why can't I just explain everything to him?

If I don't tell him that my engagement is nothing but a scam, a setup, a lie, there will never be a "Jax and Theo."

But as his words repeat in my head, I can't help but realize that after everything I've done, he doesn't want there to be a "Jax and Theo."

And that thought alone makes me want to carve my beating heart out of my chest and throw it into the Gulf of Mexico for the closest shark to eat up.

CHAPTER 27

SIN CITY HERE WE COME

JACKSON

“We’ve got to watch for that quick set,” Austin pants before guzzling down half of his water.

I squirt some water on my face as I gasp for breath. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such perfectly timed hits.” We’re in our third set and the score is eighteen to seventeen with us in the lead. We only need one more point to win the set, but I’m genuinely concerned I might keel over by then. Tallahassee is on their game today.

Scratch that, they’ve always been this good. There’s a reason they’re our closest rivals. It just seems that my little hiatus last year erased that fact from my memory.

I’ve got to admit though, Austin is doing a top notch job of showing us what he’s made of.

Like me, Austin Ward is utilizing his fifth year eligibility this year. But unlike me, the circumstances resulting in his hiatus last year are entirely more wholesome.

Austin met his wife, Emma, while attending college in Provo, Utah. They met the end of their sophomore year of college and got married just six months later. The summer between junior and senior year they had their first child, Elizabeth. Being the upstanding man, husband, and father, it’s clear he is, Austin decided to not play

volleyball his senior year in order to dedicate more time to his new family. As they neared the end of their senior year, Emma presented him the opportunity to move back here, to Pensacola, where she is originally from and her family lives. Lo and behold, Austin deferred his graduation, transferred to Palm University, and is now one of the star players for the Panthers' men's sand volleyball team.

I got lucky.

Really fucking lucky.

He's an amazing partner and an even better man.

Hell, Clay met him once too, and he even likes him. However, Clay likes everybody.

Rocky will be the real test.

The refs blow the whistle warning us to get in our positions. Austin scrubs a hand over his face before looking over at me, sweat beading down both our faces. "Ready?"

"Block big," I say before bumping my fist with his.

Picking the ball up from the sand, I walk back to our serve line. Austin takes his position at the net, and on the other side the Tallahassee players take their spots as well. Both of them looking just as exhausted as we are.

It may be mild weather in Pensacola this time of year, but the humid Florida air never really dissipates. But it's nothing compared to the stifling feeling of losing.

The ref blows his whistle and gestures his hand across the net.

Time to serve.

I do what I always do. Close my eyes, take a deep breath, and spin the ball two times in my hand. I toss it in the air, approach, and send it soaring over the net.

Without hesitation, I move across the back row as I watch Tallahassee receive. When their captain makes a quick set, again, to his teammate, Austin follows it. And with perfect precision and timing, he stuff-blocks the ball so it lands just over the net, behind their captain and into the sand.

Nineteen to seventeen.

We win!

Austin and I celebrate before moving under the net to shake our opponents' hand. Back at the bench, Coach Taylor is waiting for us, along with our athletic trainer. Thankfully, Theo is assigned to a different team today, so I don't have to worry about being near him to take the wind out of my proverbial sail.

? * I've barely said one word to him since Halloween. But that's fine because he won't even hardly look at me, let alone speak to me.

I will admit, I was probably a bit harsh. The entire reaction was very unlike me. But I couldn't take it anymore. Everything felt like it came to a boiling point. Probably something to do with the fact that I spent months trying to be "friendly."

We see how well that worked out.

"Good job, guys," Coach Taylor says as he pats each of our shoulders. Austin and I grab our towels and sling them around our necks before grabbing our water bottles. "Alright, we have practice tomorrow and Tuesday, and Thursday afternoon we're

heading to Vegas for the tournament. You guys have your classes and homework squared away for the long weekend?"

That's one thing I love about Coach Taylor. Even though he's just as committed, if not more so, to the sport as we are, he recognizes that, long term, sports aren't for everyone. Clay and Rocky are the exception. Not the rule. And even the two of them, as Olympic-bound as they are, ensured they got their degrees. Coach Taylor ensures that each one of his players is set in life one way or another. And that includes doing well in school, academic code of conduct or not.

"All set," Austin and I say in unison.

"Your wife and daughter still coming this weekend?" Coach Taylor asks Austin.

"If that's still okay?" They bought their own plane tickets there so it really isn't an issue, but I've heard Austin ask at least three times if Coach Taylor minds that they're coming along.

"Not a problem, Ward. Make sure you call the hotel, and let them know to put a pack-and-play in the room."

"And you're sure it's okay they stay in the hotel with?—"

Coach Taylor grabs Austin by the shoulder and smiles. "Son, your family is always welcome. And your little girl is the best cheerleader we've had in ages." Taylor winks and Austin beams with pride. "Family is most important, and I will never stop you from including them. Now stop sweating that stuff and keep sweating on the court. Okay?"

"Yes, sir." Coach Taylor nods at both of us before heading out for the day.

“Ready for Sin City?” I ask as the two of us walk back to the sports complex to shower off.

“My days of sinning are long over, Baker,” he replies with a chuckle. “But I’m counting on you to party enough for the both of us.”

“I probably could make that happen.” As a matter of fact. Maybe that’s exactly what I need.

* ? If U Seek Amy - Britney Spears

CHAPTER 28

PROJECT WIN JAX

THEODORE

I would have this tournament on my schedule. Because why wouldn't I? I'm clearly just that lucky.

The men's tournament in Las Vegas of all places.

? * Fuck my life.

I don't even think Jax knows I'm here. I was sitting at the back of the plane when he got on, and when we boarded the bus from the airport to our hotel he had his eyes closed and headphones on as I walked down the aisle past his seat.

But that's all about to change, because here we are, standing in the lobby of our hotel on the strip, waiting for Coach Taylor to give us our room assignments.

I'm in a hotel.

With Jackson Baker.

In Las Vegas.

I repeat... fuck my life.

Coach Taylor returns from the front desk with a pile of keys and hands them out to each of us. “Mr. Young, here’s your key,” Taylor says. I sigh regretfully before plastering on a fake smile and taking my key. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jackson glaring daggers at me. Shock, frustration, and anger evident on his face. Taylor claps his hands together and looks at all of us. “Alright, let’s go, boys! We’ve got games to win in a couple of hours!”

Half the team and Coach Taylor, not including Jax, pile in the elevator. As the doors close, I lock eyes with Jax as he continues to stare me down.

Once they close and the elevator starts to move, Coach Taylor announces, “Ward is staying in his own room because his wife and baby are attending too. Please be quiet and respectful with the noise level, and don’t you all dare pressure him into going out Saturday night when the tournament’s over.”

If Austin is staying in a room with his family, I wonder who Jax is rooming with?

A touch of jealousy rears its ugly head at the thought of him rooming with someone else, but I remember that it’s not my problem. It can’t be my problem.

The memory of Jackson looking at me the way he did in the lobby flashes through my brain all the way up to our floor. And when I walk into my room and shut the door, I think about it again. As I get dressed for our first game, it’s there, again. And when I get back down to the lobby to meet the team, it isn’t the memory that makes my skin crawl. No, it’s the sight of him staring me down. Again.

And it’s even worse the second time.

* * *

From what I’ve seen from them so far, Jax and Austin are a force to be reckoned with

on the sand.

They're in their second set of the day and just started their first game, which they're already up ten to two. I dug into Austin a little bit more on the way here, and I must admit, I'm impressed. He transferred from a super religious college to be closer to his wife's family so they would have more support with their baby.

Jax and Austin being fifth-year grad students and having so much volleyball experience under their belts is really showing. Their calm and collected attitude will be something that's hard for opponents to crack. I'm sitting on the sideline right beside Coach Taylor and watching as the ball gets slammed by the opposing team, but Jax is on it, digging it up before it hits the sand. He's up on his feet before Austin even has the ball in his hands to set. Be that as it may, he sets the ball perfectly back to Jax. The quickness with which Jax makes his approach is incredible, and the height he reaches well above the net while in the sand seems impossible.

No holding back, Jax swings with all his might, and the blocker on the opposing team is nowhere near ready. He has a wide-open court, and, between his vertical and pure power, the ball lands in the sand well before the ten-foot line. The opposing team didn't stand a chance.

I'm up and out of my seat, screaming and cheering before I can stop myself. I look over at a wide-eyed Coach Taylor and swiftly sit back in my seat.

What the fuck are you doing, Theo?

Taylor leans over with a knowing smirk covering his lips. "It's exciting, isn't it?"

"To say the least... I didn't think I would ever like watching volleyball this much." I'm keeping it to myself that watching Jax do anything is the most exciting thing, because, well... I would very much love to not be fired.

* * *

It's Friday, and Jax and Austin just bagged their last win for today in order to move on to tomorrow's bracket play. If they win those, they win the gold bracket. It's a single-elimination tournament, and most of the other pairings from Palm University have lost, so the main focus is now on Jax and Austin. I can't even put into words the pride I have in my chest watching him succeed in this, especially considering his injury last year.

It's unfortunate most of our team is now out of bracket play, but now Jax and Austin have a huge cheering section of their own. It may be all rowdy college players and Austin's wife and kiddo, but they're getting the job done distracting the other teams Jax and Austin have been playing. Not to mention, Austin's daughter has been fully entertained watching all of them act like fools beside her.

I think it's safe to say the entire team is head over heels for that little girl.

Hell, I'm pretty sure they'd invite her to dinner tonight if Austin's wife would allow it.

Coach Taylor has planned a huge dinner tonight at one of the must-visit restaurants here in Vegas, and I have to say I'm beyond glad I packed more than just khakis and polos for this trip. Jax might still be pissed at me, but that doesn't mean I can't look good for him.

Fresh out of the shower, I head to the little closet where my slacks hang, which fit my legs and thighs like they were painted on me. I slide them on and pair them with a white button-up, but I leave the top couple of buttons undone to really accentuate the thin gold chain around my neck.

Standing in the mirror, I add texture paste to my hands and work it into my hair to

give it that messy look that my clean hair would never be able to pull off on its own. I look at my contact's case and debate for a second, but I remember Jax is always drooling when I wear my glasses.

The glasses it is.

The sadistic side of me wants to see him squirm. He tries to hide his reaction to me anytime we're together, but I see the subtle things.

The way his lips part and his breath comes out in ragged pants.

The way his eyes drag up and down my body when he thinks I'm not paying attention.

And the subtle shift of his body toward mine, even when he fights it like the plague.

I know he wants me, and after watching him move around the court like a god the last two days, it's now my goal for this trip to get him to realize that. We can figure out the rest later. For now, I just want him to be mine.

I'm calling it:

Project Win Jax.

* ? how could u love somebody like me? - Artemas

CHAPTER 29

LOOK, A PUPPY.

JACKSON

“I ’ll be back soon,” Austin says before kissing his wife on the cheek, while I wait at the door of their hotel room.

Emma giggles softly and cups the side of his face. “Don’t rush. Go enjoy dinner with your team. Lizzie Bug and I will go and enjoy the pool.”

Speaking of whom, little miss Elizabeth, or Lizzie, or Lizzie Bug, comes hobbling over to me on her two little feet. Except just before she reaches me she loses her balance, falls backward, and lands square on her butt.

Her baby-blue eyes look up at me and she holds her hands up in the air, signaling for “up” as she says, “Ja Ja.”

More than eager, I squat down and scoop her up from the floor. Her little hands play at the buttons on my shirt as she continues to babble. We’ve become fast friends, she and I. Clay might not have to worry about Austin stealing his spot, but miss Lizzie might give him a run for his money.

“Ja Ja, Ja Ja,” she repeats.

I chuckle at her antics, and when Elizabeth smiles and those little dimples pop out, I

swear I almost faint from cuteness.

“Ja Ja!” She claps her two little hands together.

“I know, I know,” I pretend to agree with whatever she’s saying. “You are the prettiest girl in the world.”

Even though she can’t understand me, her face practically beams with pride.

Austin and Emma walk over to us, and Austin kisses his daughter on the head. “Da Da,” she says.

“Be good for Mama,” he tells her before kissing her one last time.

“Come here, Lizzie Bug,” Emma says before scooping her out of my arms. Emma settles Lizzie on her hip before looking at me. “Make sure he’s not back too early, okay? Two hours minimum.”

“Got it, boss,” I say with a wink before kissing both the girls on the cheek. “Come on,” I say, clapping Austin on the shoulder as we walk toward the elevators. “Let’s go have ourselves a nice team dinner.”

* * *

“Theo!” Coach Taylor booms across our private dining room, and I immediately freeze. “Come, have a seat.”

I close my eyes and silently wish to myself, “ Please don’t sit next to me. Please don’t sit next ? —”

I hear the chair to my left pull away from the table, and I let out a heavy sigh.

I don't know who I thought Coach Taylor was saving this seat for, but I should have guessed.

Theo sits down next to me, his thigh brushing mine as he pulls his chair in, and the scent of him envelops me. I clench my fists on my lap as I stop myself from taking in a deep breath.

Theo clears his throat awkwardly. "Sorry I'm late. I-I had to take a phone call just as I was leaving my room."

I clench my jaw so hard I can almost feel my teeth crack.

"Wives have a habit of calling at the most inopportune times," Taylor jokes. "How is the soon-to-be Mrs. Young?"

My stare remains glued to my glass of water. "She's good. Yeah—good. She umm—she is away on work and just wanted to check in with some... wedding details."

"You know," Taylor says, "this may be an unpopular opinion, but I loved watching my wife plan our wedding. As stressful as the entire thing was, watching her plan such a special day was just..." When I look up at him I can practically see the hearts in his eyes. "Well, it was just incredible. And every time I think of when I finally got to see her as she walked down that aisle"—he shakes his head as his smile grows a mile wide—"I'd do it all over again."

I dream of a love like that.

"Yeah," Theo clears his throat again. "It'll be quite the day, that's for sure."

I snort a sarcastic laugh before I can even stop it, and the entire table looks at me.

Grabbing my glass of water, I anxiously chug half of it down. Silently hoping that when I stop no one will be looking at me anymore.

“You okay?” Austin whispers in my ear on the other side of me.

“Yup. Mhm. So good.”

I don’t have to see his face to know he calls bullshit. “Okay then.”

“How’s the knee feeling, Jax?” Coach asks. “Been a while since you played this many games in a row.”

“Good. Knee’s good. Tip-top shape,” I answer. Because if we get off this topic quick enough then hopefully Theo won’t?—

“Everything still feeling stable?” he asks.

So much for that.

Thinning my lips, I nod. “Mhm.”

“No pain when you land?” he asks softly.

I still don’t look at him. “Nope.”

“What about?—”

“It’s fine. My knee feels fine,” I snap. Still not daring to look at him.

“Jackson.” The way he says my name has the potential to undo all of the work I’ve put in in the last six months, and I just can’t have it. I can’t. “I’m just trying to?—”

I slam my hands on the table and snap my head to him. Looking him in the eyes right through those damn glasses. “I said my knee is fine, Theo. Drop it.”

And just like that, everyone’s eyes are back on me. Except for his. His shocked expression falls, and his stare drops to his lap. Meanwhile, Coach Taylor’s face pinches in confusion, then, disappointment.

Shit.

I sigh heavily before pulling an excuse out of my ass. “Sorry. I’ve just got a migraine coming on. I don’t think I drank enough water today.”

Coach Taylor looks at me for a moment longer before grabbing the glass pitcher in front of him and passing it to me. “Drink up. We need you ready for tomorrow. When we get back to the hotel Theo can grab you a couple of electrolyte pouches.”

The rest of the dinner goes off without a hitch, regardless of the fact that you could cut the tension between Theo and I with a knife. I’m not sure if anyone besides Coach Taylor or Austin notices, but it would be pretty hard to miss.

When we get back to the hotel, I don’t dare have Theo meet me in my room, and instead, I have him bring the pouches down to the lobby. He doesn’t question it. And when he hands them to me, I’m careful not to let my fingers brush his. I don’t trust it.

I don’t trust me .

I simply give him a hollow “thank you” and make a beeline for the elevator before he has a chance to follow.

And when I get up to my room and crawl into bed for the night, I find myself endlessly staring at my ceiling. Because I may have been faking a migraine before,

but I sure as fuck have one now.

* * *

“Hey!” Austin laughs out. “We’re supposed to be warming up, jackass. What the hell you hammering hits at me for?”

Shit .

It’s the final morning of the tournament. We only have two matches today. Two matches and the tournament’s ours. I should be ready. Hell, if you would have asked me last night before dinner, I would have been. But now all I can think about is that face. That fucking face he made when I snapped at him.

I laid awake all night thinking about that face.

And the longer I lay there, the more pissed off I got.

At him.

At myself.

At this entire fucking situation.

Again.

But I can’t tell Austin that, so instead, I just smile and say, “Sorry. Shoulder was feeling a little stiff. Just working it out.”

Austin opens his mouth to speak, but instead, Emma’s voice carries across the court. “Aus, can you help me? Lizzie just pooped and it’s everywhere.”

I have to try not to laugh at the way blush spreads across his entire face.

“Sure, honey. Be right there,” he yells back. I watch as he looks for Coach Taylor only to find him and the opposing team’s coach talking to the other ref. Then, he looks at our chairs where Theo is going through his bag. “Theo!” Theo looks at him, and Austin gestures him over.

What the fuck is happening?

“You okay?” Theo rushes out as he looks Austin up and down.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. But my wife isn’t. Lizzie apparently had a poo-plosion. You know how to play?”

Theo looks just as confused as I do. “Umm, well yeah I?—”

“Perfect!” Austin hands Theo the ball. “Help Jax warm up until I get back.” Before I can protest he jogs toward Emma and Lizzie as he calls over his shoulder. “Be back in ten!”

Great. Just perfect.

Theo just looks at me for a moment like a deer in headlights before asking, “Ready?”

I roll my eyes and get into my ready position. Taking that as answer enough, Theo tosses the ball to me. I pass it back to him, and to my surprise, he sets it beautifully back to me, and without even thinking about it, I hit the ball and drill it into his arms. As it makes contact with his forearms he lets out a loud grunt, and a wince of pain spreads across his face. Suddenly, I can’t help but think that felt a little too good.

So, I do it again. And again. And again.

And, when he sets the ball a little too short, likely due to how sore his arms are getting, I take that as my opportunity to... stretch my legs a little.

Approaching the ball as best as I can, I jump in the air and let it rip. Except this time, it doesn't make contact with his arms and instead hits him right in the cheek.

Theo falls back on his ass, gripping his face in pain as he lays still in the sand.

And as agitated as I am, I'm not a monster.

Jogging over to him, I crouch down to see if he's okay. "Let me see." His furious eyes look up at me, but he does as I say. Slowly, he moves his hand from his cheek, and I already see the giant red mark forming. "Shit. Sorry."

He raises his brows. "Are you?"

I shrug. "Mostly. Good thing you weren't wearing your glasses. It'd be a shame if we lost those."

His eyes search mine for a moment. "Yeah. A shame."

"Come on." I stand and hold my hand out for him to grab. And when he does, it hits me like a tidal wave. Every memory of his skin touching mine crashes into me so hard I almost fall to the sand myself. The two of us stand there, hand in hand, staring at each other until Austin's voice finally breaks us out of our stupor. Quickly, we let go of one another and take a large step apart.

"Okay, I'm back. Thanks for—Oh shit. What happened?" Austin worriedly examines Theo's face.

Before I can say anything, Theo waves him off. "There was a cute puppy. I got

distracted.”

“Ugh, I don’t blame you. I’m dying for a puppy, but the boss says no.” Austin sighs regretfully before patting Theo on the back. “Anyway, you sure you're okay?”

Theo nods. “Yeah. Nothing a win won’t fix.”

Austin laughs. “Well we can do that, can’t we, Baker?”

I smile, but it doesn’t reach my ears. “Sure can, Ward.”

CHAPTER 30

TEQUILA!

THEODORE

K nock, knock, knock.

“Coming!” I hop off my bed while simultaneously kicking myself in the ass for not making up some reason to get out of this.

I barely have the door open before Coach Taylor is talking. “You ready to go? We’re gonna be late, and you know how I am once I’m running behind.” His eyebrows raise in warning.

I do know, in fact. He is certifiable when he’s behind schedule. So, I nod and step out of my hotel room, letting the door swing shut behind us.

Coach insisted on me tagging along to celebrate Jax and Austin’s tournament win. He said something about not wanting to be the only old guy going out with a bunch of twenty-one year olds. I about died at the thought of him insinuating I was somehow in the same age bracket as him. But, I get where he’s coming from. Especially considering they’re college students... in Vegas... on a Saturday night... with a flight not leaving until tomorrow afternoon.

Chuckling at his antics as we speed-walk down the hallway, I tease, “Coach, we’re going to a bar with ‘donkey’ in the name of it... I don’t think we’re going to be late

for anything.”

“I have a strict personal rule that I never stay out past eleven with my players,” he states matter-of-factly.

“It’s nine, bud. Take a chill pill.” I nudge his shoulder with mine and laugh. But I can’t help but think to myself that I hope tonight goes significantly better than dinner last night.

I think I’m going for a margarita. That’ll solve all my problems. Maybe Coach needs one... or three.

Coach is so wound up all the time. Not that I necessarily blame him. As someone who spends their life around college students you have to develop a spine of steel. But the guy seriously seems like he needs to unclench a little. But then again... I haven’t taken the time to get to know him very well. Outside of passing conversations, he and I have barely spoken now that I come to think of it. Last night was the first time I’ve ever even heard him talk about anybody in his life. I silently chastise myself, knowing full well that if I actually took the time to get to know the people around me it might actually improve my life rather than hinder it.

? * I’ve always been so focused on getting better and doing the next thing. I’ve kept my head down and done what I needed to prove I could succeed. Always moving. Never stopping. So, personal details just have never really been my thing.

Ever .

Except when it comes to Jackson Baker. I’ve wanted to know everything about him since day one. And despite how friendly we have tried to be or how pissed off he is now, I can’t seem to shake it.

“What the hell happened to your eye?” Coach asks as the two of us ride down to the lobby in the elevator.

I touch the dark bruise that has started to form along my cheekbone. “Was peppering with Jax this morning before the first match. Saw a puppy. Wasn’t paying attention. Hit got me right in the face.”

Coach pinches his face. “Ouch.”

Yeah, fucking ouch.

I know the little ass did it on purpose, too. I’m decent at volleyball, but he knew there was no way for me to shield my face in time for that ball. But that’s the least I deserve, so I can’t blame him for it.

I would’ve done the same in his shoes, probably worse, if I’m being honest.

* * *

The music is blaring as Coach and I walk into the Donkey Bar—wow, those are words I never thought I’d say—with Jax and a disheveled looking Austin in front of us.

Reaching out, I gently grab Austin’s shoulder. He looks absolutely fucking exhausted. “Hey, man, you okay?”

Austin answers. “Y-yeah, I’m fine. Why? Do I not look okay?”

“Just making sure.” His eyes are darting around the bar in panic, and I look to Jax beside him, urging him to make sure his friend is good.

Jax grabs his other shoulder and softly says, “Austin, you don’t have to drink if you don’t want to.”

“I’ll have one beer; it’ll be fine.” I think Austin is saying this to himself rather than us.

Jax and I murmur, “Okay” and drop it for now.

Once we’re seated at our hightop, the waitress is on it ordering our drinks, and four beers hit the table not even two minutes later. She takes our order of what seems like twelve different appetizers and is on her way.

It feels like the food arrives just as fast, and we all dive in. I grab a cheese stick from Jax’s plate, and the side-eye I get from that is enough to tell me he doesn’t play over the fried cheese.

Coach is on his second beer and is looking at his watch like he’s got a hot date waiting on him, but I know he’s eagerly waiting for the acceptable time to slip out and return to the safety of his hotel room. He may get along great with the players, but he’s always been very careful to toe the line between friend and Coach.

I may need to take some notes from him...

Austin has sweat lining his brow now, and if I didn’t know any better, I would think he was coming down with some kind of illness or something. Coach must be picking up on the weird vibes he’s putting off, too. “Is this because you’re away from the girls?”

Like the dam has been cracked open, Austin starts to spill his guts. “I just feel so bad. Emma has been lugging Lizzie around all weekend, and I feel like I’ve barely seen the two of them. Lizzie is teething so she’s been cranky, and I can tell Emma is

beyond exhausted. I just... I feel bad is all.”

Fuck, he looks on the verge of crying.

Without hesitation, Coach throws his hand on Austin’s shoulder. “Did you want to come out tonight?”

Austin looks at Jax who huffs a soft laugh and smiles. “Austin, bud, you’re not going to offend me if you’d rather spend some time with the girls. It’s okay. I promise.”

Austin sighs heavily before shaking his head, and Coach Taylor gently squeezes his shoulder. “Okay, boys, hold the fort down. I’m going to drop this one off to his girls.” Taylor pulls his wallet out and throws two hundred-dollar bills down on the table, before walking a clearly relieved Austin out of the bar

I wonder out loud, “Can men get whatever women get after having a baby?”

“Postpartum depression?” Jax looks at me in confusion.

“Yeah. Do you think he’s got that, maybe? Or maybe just anxiety. I mean, I’m no doctor, but that can’t be how you’re supposed to act...”

Jax rolls his eyes at me. “Theo, you have no clue what it means to love someone so deeply the way Austin does. Not just for Emma but for Lizzie, too. I can’t imagine a piece of me walking around in this world. I would want to do anything in my power to protect it.” He takes a long sip of his beer. “But yes, men can experience postpartum or just a change to emotions after babies, but I don’t think that’s Austin’s issue. He just... he loves. ”

Love.

I'm slack-jawed for a second as my brain processes the word he just uttered. At that moment, I decide I'm going to need more than just a beer if the two of us are going to discuss love.

I throw my hand up, and the server comes rushing over. "Two margaritas with salt, on the rocks, and two tequila shots. Actually, make those shots doubles." Jax looks at me like I've suddenly grown two heads so I try to recover my impulsiveness. "We-we've got a champion over here," I say while patting Jax's thigh. Unknowingly, I let my hand linger for a little too long. But to my surprise, he doesn't pull away.

Jax interrupts before the server can turn to head to the bar and tells her, "Make mine frozen, actually."

As the server walks away I dare myself to look at him. With my hand still resting on his thigh, the two of us stare at each other before a slow and wide smile starts to spread across his face. Then, Jax bursts out in uncontrollable laughter. I can't help it, I don't even know what he's laughing at but hearing that sound come from him is infectious. I chuckle as I ask, "What's so fucking funny?"

Jax has tears streaming down his face. "Y-your—You're eye."

I reach up with my other hand and let my fingers ghost along my cheek bone, before I bark out an even harder laugh. Our hysterics continue for a while, despite everyone looking at us like we're crazy. Once the two of us regain some of our composure, Jax wipes away the last of the tears falling from his eyes. "Oh my god, I fucking needed that."

I smile widely at him. "Are we even now?"

He snorts. "Not even close. But it sure is a fucking good start."

The server appears out of nowhere with our drinks and sets them on the table. Jax and I each hold up a shot, and to my surprise he says, “To well-deserved black eyes.”

“To well-deserved black eyes,” I agree before we crash our shot glasses together.

* ? Get A Room (with Megan Cromwell) - VOILà, Megan Cromwell

CHAPTER 31

IF I WAS A DUCK

JACKSON

“If a river was liquor and I was a... oh shit, what am I?” ? * Theo busts out laughing as we hold our shots in the air. “Oh yeah! If a river was liquor and I was a duck, I’d swim my way down and drink my way up. But a river ain’t liquor and I ain’t no duck, so let’s take these shots and get fucked up.”

Theo snorts. “I think we’re already there, buddy.”

“Eh, fuck it.” I lick the salt off my hand, down the tequila, and shove the lime that’s in my other hand in my mouth, rind and all.

As I attempt to suck the lime dry, I watch as Theo does the same, but unlike our last six shots, my eyes zero in on the way Theo’s lips wrap around his lime.

Oh fuck.

And because I’m too fucking drunk to have a decent reaction time, Theo clocks my stare. Slowly, he pulls the lime out and sets it with the rest of its dried up friends. A slow smile spreads across his face as he holds out his hand. “Lime?”

I pull the whole lime from my mouth and set it in his hand, which he then sets on the pile.

Like she has all night, our server clocks us as soon as our shot glasses are empty and comes right over. “Another round?”

My eyes grow wide, and I look over at Theo, who is now starting to sway in his chair as much as I am. But there’s a new look on his face. I’ve seen it countless times, on Clay, on Emerson, and even on little Lizzie Bug.

Mischief.

“I think we’ll take one more round,” Theo tells her.

“Be right back,” her bubbly voice announces before heading to the bar.

Thank god Coach Taylor decided not to come back. When he took Austin back to his room, Lizzie caught sight of Coach and insisted he play for a while. Being the softy at heart that he is, he was all too happy to agree, and by the time he managed to peel himself off the floor after building what I’m assuming was countless block towers, he decided to hit the hay.

When he texted us to make sure it was okay, Theo and I were already on our third shot and second margarita, so we assured him it was more than fine.

“Where the hell did you learn that anyway?”

“Learn what?” I ask before sucking down more of my frozen margarita through the straw. A vital piece of information about me, I will always choose a frozen margarita, because I’m secure enough in my masculinity to admit on-the-rocks margaritas are shit and frozen is far superior.

I mean, it’s like a slushie... but for adults. What’s better than that?

Theo chuckles. “That ridiculous toast.”

I hold my finger up in the air. “First of all, it’s not ridiculous, it’s clever as fuck. Second of all, my dad says them all the time. Mostly just to embarrass everyone around him, but also because he takes pride in knowing he’s the cleverest person in the room.”

“Is he?”

“Is he what?” I down another gulp of margarita.

Theo tips his head back, laughing even harder this time. Actually, we’ve been doing a lot of that this evening. I don’t know if it’s strictly because of all the alcohol, or because for a few hours we’ve just decided to not give a fuck, or a little of both, but it’s felt so fucking good. “Is he the cleverest person in the room?” Theo asks.

“Oh. Yeah, he is. My brothers and I like to pretend he’s not, but behind my mom, he’s the smartest person I know.” I lean in closer and Theo follows suit. “But don’t tell him I said my mom is smarter than him,” I whisper, loudly .

“Don’t worry.” Theo’s tone matches mine. “I won’t.”

? * Suddenly, the DJ changes the music and the opening chords of “Right Round” by Flo Rida and Ke\$ha blares through the bar, just as the server reappears. I swear to god I think she’s magic. “Here you are, gentlemen!”

Theo and I have matching looks of excitement as she walks away. “What do you say, Mr. Young...” I reach for our shot glasses and hand him his, this time sans the salt and lime. “Wanna show me what you’ve got?”

Theo’s eyes heat as he brings the glass to his full lips. “Oh, most definitely.”

* ? A Bar Song (Topsy) - Shaboozy

* ? Right Round - Flo Rida and Ke\$ha

CHAPTER 32

I-N-H... WELL, SHIT.

THEODORE

J ax and I have enough alcohol coursing through our bodies that I couldn't even spell the word inhibition, let alone have any.

? * Being in Vegas feels like being on another planet. And I'm not just talking about the nonstop partying or the clubs that never seem to close, but what it feels like to be here with Jax. It's the feeling of the two of us having the freedom to finally let loose, regardless of the fact that it's going to come with the world's worst hangover.

For once... neither of us have to be who we really are. We can just be who we want to be.

No one has to know I'm engaged. And because of that, no one will judge the fact that the person bent over in front of me and shaking his ass isn't said fiancée.

And what's more, no one will judge me for dancing right along with him.

I place my hands on Jax's hips, and he grinds into my half-hard cock. The gasp he lets out is loud enough I can hear it over the music. Standing him upright, so his back is tight against my chest, I practically growl in his ear, "This isn't very professional of me."

“Your professionalism is the least of my concerns.”

Jax snakes his hands around the back of my neck and tilts his head back, wearing an absolute blissed-out expression on his face. And I’m not stupid enough to pass up the opportunity to pepper kisses along his neck before I grab the lobe of his ear between my teeth. A low moan slips past his lips as he presses his plump ass into my cock.

I growl, “Jax.”

It’s a warning, but it falls on drunk ears.

He moans, “What, Mr. Young?”

I let the bass pulse through my veins right alongside the copious amounts of tequila and sink deeper into the feeling of having fun for the first time in years. My fingers find his waistband, and I play with the hem of his briefs sticking out over his black jeans. “I think it might be in your best interest to not call me that right now.”

He spins around in my arms, and we’re nose to nose now. “What would Bridget think about this?” I don’t miss the snarl of his lip when he says her name.

I look him straight in the eyes and say the words that have been on the tip of my tongue for far too long, “Bridget and I are in an arranged marriage. I don’t love her. Never have and never will. More importantly, she doesn’t love me either. We’re doing this for our families, or, at least I am. She only seems to care about how I make her look.” That was a remarkably fluent speech for someone who has drunk as much as I have.

And considering Jax is just as drunk as I am, if not more, I know he understood the severity of everything I just said, because his face morphs from shock to mischief in about ten seconds flat. “Jax... what are you thinking?”

“So both your parents arranged this marriage?” he clarifies.

“Yes...”

“Why? Are you some kind of mafia boss? Oh—No—I bet it’s your dad, and you’re set to take over the—” He puts his hands in front of our face and makes an air quote, saying, “Family business.”

I burst out into uncontrollable laughter because the whole thing... this entire inconveniently, bizarre situation is just as ridiculous as it sounds. But when I finally pull myself together and wipe the tears from my eyes, I realize Jax isn’t laughing with me this time. “Oh shit.” I clear my throat. “No. Not the mafia, Jax. Both of our families own vineyards in Virginia. We’ve been neighbors our whole life. Actually, our families have been neighbors for decades.”

He shakes his head, and his brows pull together in confusion. “Okay... so why an arranged marriage? This isn’t the eighteenth century.”

“At first I thought it was just because they wanted both of the family businesses to succeed. But the older I’ve gotten the more I realized it has always been... I don’t know... the plan I guess. Our families have been inseparable for as long as I can remember. It’s always been Bridget and me... Theo and Bridget... the two only children who were doted on by their parents. The only children that our parents would look at and go ‘I just can’t wait for them to get married one day, look at how cute they are.’ And one day I woke up and it was actually real. Their plan became my life, and I don’t even entirely know how or why it happened.”

“Wow.” He looks utterly dumbfounded. “This only child stuff makes way too much sense now.”

“What the hell’s wrong with being an only child?” I playfully slap his chest.

Jax sways and stops himself by placing his hands back on my shoulders. “There’s nothing wrong with it, but a relationship with two of you that aren’t used to sharing... it never ends well. And I can tell that your relationship with Bridget is anything but good.” My brows pull together because how would he know my relationship with Bridget isn’t good? But I don’t question it. All this serious talk this deep into shots should not be allowed. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I”—he raises his hand in the air—“have a plan. Tell me I’m wrong and I’ll shut the fuck up, happily.” I raise my brow. “Well probably not, but I’ll at least try... for five minutes... okay, maybe two.”

“Let’s hear it,” I say with a laugh. Between the mounting pressure, the desire to never want to be out of Jackson’s arms again, and all of the liquid courage coursing through me, I’m down for just about anything. I’m just happy he’s talking to me. Looking at me. Touching me .

But then three words fall out of his gorgeous mouth, and it takes me all of a half of a second to realize the way I feel when he says them is nothing compared to the way I felt when I said them to Bridget. “Let’s get married.”

* ? Drink N Dance - Future, Metro Boomin

CHAPTER 33

KOA

JACKSON

“O ooo, I want that one,” I say as I tap the glass of the display case. Fern, who is officially now my new best friend— move aside Clay— grabs the ring and sets it on the counter. Picking it up, I do my best to squint, turning the two fuzzy rings into one mostly clear one. It’s a black tungsten band with dark wood inlay.

“The wood actually comes from the Hawaiian islands,” Fern explains. “It’s Koa wood. Many native warriors used to use this wood to make their weapons, and now it’s a widely used symbol for strength.” She looks between Theo and I, and a knowing smile takes over her face. “The word Koa directly translates to ‘warrior.’ I can tell, sweetie, that’s you.”

“Yeah,” Theo says softly, and I look over at him. “It is.”

The two of us stare at one another for what feels like an eternity, when suddenly, the doors to the chapel burst open and a man in a tuxedo T-shirt who’s carrying his new bride comes barreling out.

“Alright, dolls!” Fern claps her hands together. “You’re up!” She places two glasses on the counter before filling them with a mystery amber liquid. “I have everything I need from you two, and I’ll charge the rings to the card you used for the license. Tip ‘em back, and go get yourselves married!”

Theo and I each grab our glasses. “What’s one more?” he asks with a smile a mile wide.

? * We down our shots before grabbing each other’s rings and stuffing them in our pockets. “Come Fly With Me” by Michael Bublé starts playing over the speakers, and Theo and I take that as our cue to lock arms. The two of us walk down the red and gold aisle, giggling like school girls the entire way.

“Well, well, well,” Elvis, my new new best friend— sorry, Fern— says as we reach the alter. “Aren’t you two good-looking young men? You fellas ready to”—he moves his hips back and forth just like Elvis would have in Mama Catherine’s dreams, and ohmygod wait until she hears Elvis married me, she’s going to be so excited! —“get hitched?”

Theo hiccups. “We sure are, Mr. Elvis Presley!”

? * “Perfect! Hit it, Fern.” The music changes to a soft version of Elvis’ “It’s Now or Never,” and he starts the service. Slowly, Theo and I thread our fingers together, and I can’t help but notice that I don’t feel even the teensiest, tiniest bit of nervousness or hesitation. And I mean sure, that could, maybe, possibly, have a little something to do with all the drinking but, if Mr. Jose Cuervo is what it took to get us here, I’ll be sure to send him our first Christmas card. “We are gathered here today to witness the union of”—Elvis looks up at the TV screen to our left where there’s a queue of all the couples in line—“Theodore and Jackson.” Theo gently squeezes my hand. “This special occasion marks the beginning of their life as a married couple...”

Elvis continues to speak as Theo leans in to whisper something in my ear. And just as I think he’s going to say something sweet or romantic he says, “I thought Elvis was going to be better looking.”

I snort a laugh. Mr. Presley notices but doesn’t stop his speech. He’s getting paid

regardless. “You know that this isn’t the real Elvis, right?”

This time Theo snorts. “Yes. Wait... yeah I know he’s not the real Elvis.”

“You may now face each other,” Mr. Elvis Presley says, and Theo and I do as he says. “Do you, Jackson, take Theodore to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer or for poorer, as long as you both shall live?”

“Yup! Sure do!” I announce, practically bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“And do you, Theodore, take Jackson to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in?—”

“Yes,” Theo answers eagerly, looking me dead in the eye. His stare suddenly feeling far more intense than it has since that waitress brought us our first shot. I swallow harshly as his thumb brushes along the back of my hand.

“Well alright! Rings?”

Letting go of one hand, Theo and I reach in our pockets and pull out one another’s rings. “Jackson, you’re first.” I grab Theo’s left hand and hold his ring between his fingers. “Repeat after me. Theodore Young, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love today, tomorrow, always, and forever.”

Oh shit, that’s a long one.

I slide the ring on Theo’s finger, look him in the eyes and say, “Theodore Young, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love today, tomorrow, always, and forever.”

Theo lets out a shaky breath as Elvis nods at him and says, “Now you. Jackson Baker,

I give you this ring as a symbol of my love today, tomorrow, always, and forever.”

Theo grabs my hand and slowly slides the black ring over my finger, and so calmly, like he’s the soberest he’s been in his entire life, repeats, “Jackson Baker, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love today, tomorrow, always, and forever.”

“Before these witnesses, you have pledged to be joined in marriage. By the authority vested in me by the great state of Nevada, and the power of rock and roll, I now pronounce you married. You may kiss your hunk of burning love.”

Theo grabs the sides of my face and crashes his mouth to mine. I let out a deep moan as the taste of him coats my tongue. And when the thought of “holy shit, I’m kissing my husband” flashes through my mind, I feel as if I could melt right into this beer stained carpet.

? * “Viva Las Vegas” begins to blare through the chapel, and Theo and I manage to pull our lips from one another. The two of us stand there, staring at each other breathlessly. Then, in a tone barely audible above the music, he asks, “Does this officially make me a cougar?”

“It sure as shit does, Mr. Young.”

“Come on boys, I’ve got marriage certificates for you to sign!” Fern yells from the lobby.

“Ready, husband?” I ask Theo.

“So fucking ready, husband.”

* ? Come Fly With Me - Michael Bublé

* ? It's Now or Never - Elvis

* ? Viva Las Vegas - Elvis

CHAPTER 34

NOTHING STAYS IN VEGAS

THEODORE

Who is this random man dressed up as Elvis?

? * I'm looking at him, and his mouth is moving, but nothing's coming out, or maybe I can't hear?

Yeah, I don't think I can hear. The only thing in my head is the sound of my heart thumping.

Turning my head slightly to face forward, I'm holding hands with Bridget.

Fuck !

Did she fucking drug me and bring me to Vegas? Did she fly in without me knowing and drag me to get married before I slipped out of her hands?

As my panic starts to rise, her face begins contorting into what I can only imagine she will look like when she's eighty. I'm still holding her hands, not squeezing, but she starts to scream, and I look down where our hands meet, and her bones are cracking.

What the fuck is going on?

I feel a hand slap my cheek, and it's definitely not this old-lady version of Bridget, but it's enough to pull me out of wherever I was.

Suddenly, I hear Jax's voice and realize the horror of marrying a geriatric Bridget was nothing more than a nightmare. "Please... for the love of all that is good, stop fucking screaming. It feels like my head's three seconds away from imploding. And you're in the blast zone." He lets out an exaggerated groan. "Holy shit I don't think I've been this hungover since I put those cameras in—uh, since Clay and I won the beer pong tournament during sophomore year homecoming."

Slowly, I have enough courage to peel my eyes open. When I look down I find Jax's arm draped over my torso, as well as one of his legs.

Wait.

Jackson Baker is in my bed.

Jackson Baker is naked in my bed.

Jackson Baker is naked and hungover in my bed.

Where the fuck are we, and what the hell happened last night?

My head, too, feels like it could implode any minute. My mouth feels like what I imagine it's like going five days with no water, and my whole body feels like it's vibrating. Oh, and I could throw up on command right now. I swipe my free hand over my face, and I'm hit with the metal of a ring, and the second it does I get a sinking feeling in my gut. Even though my hungover brain knows exactly what it is, I need to see it to be sure. Inhaling a shaky breath, I put my hand out in front of my face and find a black ring on a very important finger.

What. The. Fuck.

Then, all at once, it's as if my brain jump starts, and I'm able to put all of the pieces together.

I'm in Vegas.

I'm in Vegas, on a work trip.

Jackson and I are naked in bed.

Marrying Bridget was just a nightmare.

But if marrying Bridget wasn't real, and Jax is in my bed, and I have a ring on my finger then?—

Jesus fucking christ.

With my unsteady voice I whisper, "Jackson... What happened last night?"

Nonchalantly, Jackson responds, "We got married. Now go back to bed before I divorce you."

Like he didn't just drop the most earth shattering news on me, Jax's soft snores go back to filling the room. I just lay there... wracking my brain for the last thing I remember, but I can't seem to pinpoint it. I vaguely remember a woman named Rose... no, Ivy... maybe Fern?

There is absolutely no way I got married in Las Vegas. By an Elvis impersonator. To Jackson Baker. While still engaged to Bridget.

Of all times to do something crazy... of all the ways I could have rebelled... this is what I choose.

You've really fucking done it now, Theo.

After what feels like an hour, Jax finally speaks. "I can hear you thinking from here."

"Well what do you expect, Jax? You just told me we got married. You're naked in my bed. Anyone could have seen us last night." Oh, shit. I can feel my chest getting tight. "I work for the school. I'm engaged. I?—"

Jackson puts his hand over my mouth. "Shhhh." I mumble against his hand, but he doesn't move it. "I'm really going to need you to chill the hell out, Theo."

I sit up and Jax's hand falls from my face. Once I get the room to stop spinning, and the feeling of intense nausea subsides, I look down at Jax whose eyes are still closed but somehow has the smile of the Cheshire cat across his face.

"Jax," I sigh. "What the fuck are we doing? You know I'm supposed to marry Bridget. I?—"

His eyes pop open, and a stern look crosses his face as he holds up one finger. "You were supposed to marry Bridget. Now you don't have to." His mischievous smile reappears. "You're mine now."

Fuck I can feel tears starting to sting my eyes. "I was supposed to be leaving you alone. It's your graduate year, and here I am, ruining it again. We need to get this annulled." I throw the covers off the bed. "Come on. I bet if we get down to wherever we got married, they haven't even sent the marriage certificate off yet. No one will have to know. I won't disappoint my parents. The school won't have to find out. I won't fuck up your life any more than I already have. I-I—" A single tear finally falls

from my eye. Jax sits up in front of me with a grunt and runs his thumb across my cheek to stop the tear from falling further.

With both of us sitting in bed, completely naked, Jax softly asks, “Forget all of that for one single second and answer the question, did you want to marry Bridget? Is that the life you want for yourself?”

I silently shake my head. Not needing to give it a second’s thought.

“Then for once, Theo, live a life for yourself. Don’t worry about her parents, or your parents. Don’t worry about your family’s business... which by the way, is not enough of a reason to marry someone you don’t like, and live the life you want to live. I may have been drunk as fuck but I never would have suggested it if I didn’t want to help. Despite everything that’s happened between us.”

The feeling of regret is overwhelming. “Why would you want to help me? To stay married to me?”

He sighs and smiles softly. “I shouldn’t care about this or you, not after everything you’ve done.” I drop my head, but he hooks his finger under my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “And I’ll never be able to explain the effect you’ve had on me, but even though I’ve done everything in my power not to care, more than anything, I want you happy, Theo. Whatever that may look like.”

Great, now my nose is really stinging with the floodgates about to open. “You make me happy, Jackson.”

He wraps his hand around the side of my neck and drops his forehead to mine. “That’s all I want.”

Then he’s pressing his lips to mine in a slow, gentle kiss. One we’ve never shared

before.

They've always been hot and heated, both of us rushing. This is the complete opposite, and it's the kind of kiss I could drown in. But I also remember the state that I'm in when a wave of nausea rolls over me. I pull away breathlessly and whisper, "As fun as this would be, I quite literally feel like I could die, and we need to figure out what the fuck we're going to do when we get back."

Jax chuckles. "Yeah, hungover sex doesn't sound entirely appealing at the moment, does it?"

My eyes roam over him for a moment. "How do you still look so fucking good? Wait—why are we naked in the first place?"

"You threw up in the shower. I had to help you get out. My clothes were soaked."

"Oh my god." I cover my eyes and flop back onto the bed. "This may all be too much for me to handle. Just leave me here to die."

Jax bursts into laughter and hops off the bed. "Oh don't be so dramatic. I'll order us the best hangover cure I know, and we will come up with a plan."

"Oh, and what is that?"

"Some McDonald's breakfast, of course."

My stomach groans desperately at the mention of the greasy food. "You're the best husband ever."

He beams with pride. "I know."

* ? time travel - mgk, Trippie Redd

CHAPTER 35

TURBULENCE

JACKSON

“Well don’t the two of you look like shit,” Austin says as Theo and I board the plane, sans wedding bands. After we ate our body weight in greasy food we decided it was best to wait until we get back to Pensacola and tell Bridget and our families before we tell anyone else.

“Thanks a lot,” I groan as I sit down in the seat across the aisle from him. Emma is doing her best to put Lizzie to sleep in the seat next to him. And, just as I think Theo is about to walk to the back of the plane where Coach is sitting, he steps around me and sits in the seat next to the window.

I look at him in confusion, and he says, “Coach asked if I could swap with Jeremy. He wanted to go over some film with them from their losses on Friday. Lucky you.”

I grin as he settles into his seat. “Lucky me.”

Once the rest of the plane boards and the flight attendants perform all of their safety checks and demonstrations, the plane begins to taxi. As it lifts into the air, I plug my headphones into the seat in front of me and press play on Maverick from the list of in-flight movies. I’m just about to doze off when the captain’s voice rings through my headphones letting us know we’re about to fly through some turbulence. Not more than a minute later the plane begins to shake.

Turbulence has never bothered me much, but, despite our best efforts to cure our hangovers, I'm still feeling queasy. So when the plane hits a particularly bumpy patch I have to grip the arm rests and take some deep breaths as I do my best to not ralph all over my lap. The feeling of Theo's pinky looping with mine steals my attention, and that's exactly how we stay for the rest of the flight.

* * *

? * My car pulls into my driveway just a few seconds before Theo pulls into his, just behind Bridget's. Leaving my bags in the backseat, I climb out and move to the end of the drive, staring at Theo across the street. He gets out of his car and slings his duffle bag over his shoulder, and when he does, I see the wedding band around his finger. He stands there for a moment, staring back at me, before dropping his chin. And even though this whole entire thing was my hairbrained idea, I can't help but suddenly feel a little nervous. Because even though I don't know the woman—nor have I been particularly fond of her attitude—she's done nothing to me. And because of me, her whole life is about to get turned upside down. But I refuse to let Theo face this alone. So, I take a deep breath, pull my band out of my sweatpants pocket, and slide it on my finger. Theo's eyes follow the motion, and I watch as his shoulders relax ever-so-slightly at the sight of my ring sitting in its place on my finger.

I walk across the street, and when I get to him I ask, "Ready?"

He shakes his head slightly. "No, but it's now or never. And we're going to have to move fast because as soon as we tell her, she will tell everyone."

"Austin and I are supposed to meet with Coach first thing tomorrow morning to go over tape, you and I can just get there a little early," I tell him.

"Are you—Are you sure you still want to do this?" he asks reluctantly.

“I am. We already got married. Have the Elvis picture and everything to prove it, don’t we?” I ask, doing my best to ease some of his worries.

A look of hesitation crosses his face, but it doesn’t last. “Yeah. Right. Okay.” He inhales a quick breath. “Let’s get this disaster over with.”

I take a few steps toward the house but realize Theo is still glued to his spot in the driveway. My eyes zero in on the way his hand is shaking as it hangs at his side. “You coming?”

“I just—I’m about to disappoint everyone. And for what? For doing something for myself. How fucking selfish is that?”

I take a step back toward him and hold out my hand. He stares at it a moment before reaching out and grabbing it. The second it’s in mine, the shakes subside. “Theo, look at me.” Through the lenses of his glasses, his eyes lock with mine. “It’s not selfish to create the life you want for yourself.” I can tell he doesn’t entirely believe me so I say the only other thing I can think of that would help right now. “And you’re not disappointing everyone. You’re not disappointing me. I’m right here. We’re a team now.”

The corners of his mouth turn up slightly before he takes one step, and another. Once the two of us reach his door, we let go of each other’s hands. And even though I know my way around this house very well by now, I let him lead me inside. The second it shuts behind us and he sets his duffle on the floor, Bridget’s voice sounds from the kitchen. “Theodore! Thank god you’re home. The caterer called and they said—Oh!” She pauses as she spots us both standing by the door. “What’s he doing here?”

Bridget takes a second to look Theo up and down, and I spot the moment her gaze locks on his hand as he nervously fidgets with them in front of him. She points at his

wedding band, confusion marring her face. “What is that? That’s not the band we picked out. Why do you have that on?”

Her gaze moves over to me, and she spots mine immediately. But before she can speak to me, Theo says, “Bridget, something happened.”

* ? THE ONE YOU LOVED - The Plot In You

CHAPTER 36

DODGING THE... brIDGET

THEODORE

“B ridget, something happened.” I refuse to let her think this was a mistake with Jax, so for once, when it comes to Bridget, I hold my ground. Bridget’s eyes are darting back and forth between Jax and me. Her eyes move from our wedding bands, then to our faces, and back to our bands. A look of pure panic is covering her face now, so I add, “Why don’t we sit down so we can talk.”

She’s shaking her head back and forth like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum.

And when I realize it isn’t sorrow or despair that has taken over her face, rather fury and disgust, I realize that me getting out of this marriage, albeit not in the kindest fashion, might just be one of the best things I could have done. Because she’s not upset she’s lost me, she’s upset she’s lost a fiancé. A husband.

Keeping that in mind, I sit down on the couch and pull Jax down right beside me, lacing our fingers together and placing them on my leg. Hopefully, that will keep my leg from bouncing.

Bridget takes a seat in the accent chair that’s across the living room, still eyeing me up and down. Silently judging every fiber of my being, just as she has the entirety of our... relationship .

I've never so much as willingly given that woman a kiss, but in that same breath, she's also never given me one. Some days, I truly wonder how in the hell we've even kept up with this charade as long as we have.

Breaking me out of my thoughts, she finally speaks. "You'll go and get it annulled. Now."

? * I level her with a firm stare. "That's not going to happen, Bridget. Jackson and I are staying married, and our wedding"—I point between her and I—"is clearly not happening. I'm going to call my parents and let them know now, and you're going to do the same. You can also let them know all of your things will be shipped back to their house, since it's been evident since the first moment you got here that you would quite literally rather be any place else." I pause, catching my breath and feel the weight of the world being lifted off my shoulders. And for good measure, I add, "I have booked you a room at the hotel on the other side of campus and bought you a ticket for a flight home."

When my eyes move to the plane ticket sitting on the coffee table she lets out a humourless laugh. Likely realizing I'm not joking in the slightest. "Theo, we can't call the wedding off."

"Actually..." I look over to Jax who offers me a soft smile before I look back at her. "I can."

As a last-ditch effort, she threatens, "My father is not going to be happy about this."

"This is my life, Bridget. You and your family do not own me, no matter how much you may think you do. Your father can be upset as long as he wants to be; I'll be happy, and that's all that matters." I look down at my leg where Jax's thumb is running along the back of my hand in a calming motion. "I want you to be happy too, Bridget. And I know for a fact you were just as miserable as I was in this relationship."

Don't you want to be with someone who actually makes you happy? To be in a relationship that's filled with love and laughter and... passion .”

We didn't talk about sex often, but when I would bring it up it's like Bridget was a trying anything in her power not to have to think about fucking me. And it's not just the sex; unless we were arguing, we never really talked about... well, anything.

The truth of the matter is, neither of us should have been put in this situation, but deep down, I know she was doing it for the same reason I was.

Our parents.

I see it on her face. She knows I'm right. She knows there's more to this life than the lie the two of us have been living. I may not know her soul, but I know her as a person. And if there's one thing I know about Bridget, it's that every thought running through her head plays across her face.

Standing from her chair, she stomps over to me, and I prepare to take, at minimum, a slap from her, but all she does is stick her hand out.

Wait, is she trying to shake my hand.

Slowly, I reach out to take her hand in mine. It lasts only a mere moment, and before I know it, she's heading into the master bedroom to pack up her stuff, which, thankfully, isn't a lot due to traveling and never really fully unpacking. We can hear her talking, but I think it's just her best friend. I'm sure the next person she'll call will be her parents, so I do the same.

I hit the video call option under my mom's contact information, and she picks up after a few rings. I smile at her sipping her wine on the couch with her book. “Theo! What a treat! I never get video calls from you. Oh baby, you look so happy, what's

happened? Is it Bri?—”

“I got married, Mom.” I let that sink in a moment before I add, “To Jax. Jackson Baker.” I raise our linked left hands up into the view of the camera and smile.

Jax awkwardly waves with his free hand. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Young.”

“Hi... Wait, Theo... Is this some kind of prank? You know I’m too old to be pulling tricks on.”

“It’s not a prank, Mom. I really am married.”

“Wh-what about Bridget? Theo, I didn’t even get to see my baby get married.” Her eyes start to well with tears. But as much as I hate to be the cause of her sadness, I realize my lack of speaking up has been the cause of my own sadness for years.

“You know as much as I do that what Bridget and I had wasn’t a marriage made to last, Mom. There was nothing there... I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Unexpectedly, my dad’s voice breaks through the speakers. “Why didn’t you tell us? We could have put a stop to this, Son.” The sadness in his voice almost makes me crack.

Looking anywhere but at the camera, I murmur, “I-I didn’t want to disappoint you and Mom.”

My dad’s voice cracks with emotion, which just about breaks my facade. “I hate thinking that you’ve been so miserable for years only because you thought we would be disappointed in you. I’m more disappointed in myself that I didn’t see the signs. And even more so, that you didn’t feel comfortable enough to come to us.”

“Don’t blame yourselves. I’m an adult and should have said something.” And that’s the truth. Ultimately, this is no one’s fault but my own. Jax is the first person who has put my happiness first, and I hope I can do the same for him.

As hesitant and confused as she looks, Mom reassures me, “Well, you definitely are an adult. Which means you can make your own decisions, so”—she looks at Dad then back at me—“if you’re happy, we’re happy, for the both of you.” My dad nods in agreement, and she shifts her focus to Jax. Her face softens as she looks at him. “Jax, we can’t wait to meet you, honey.”

“I can’t wait to meet you either, Mrs. Young.”

“Oh, call me Carol, no more of the ‘Mrs. Young.’ We are family now.”

He talks back and forth with my mom and dad like he’s known them his whole life, and I truly envy him for his ease with conversations. Before I know it, my mom is saying bye to both of us, and Jax has his phone out and is calling who I’m assuming are his parents

We might as well get the most important people out of the way first, right?

The phone literally barely rings before his mom picks up and Jax is yelling, “Surprise! I’m married!”

Jax pans the video to our linked hands with our rings and then over to my face.

“WHAT!” Jax’s mom screeches through the phone. “Oh my god, is that Theo?!” She’s fully jumping up and down, and I can hear his dad yelling, asking if she’s okay. “I knew it! Is he why you were all mopey over the summer? I knew it was over a special someone, I just knew it!”

“What’s going on?” a deep voice booms.

“Jackson is married!” His mom yells loud enough that I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole of Montana heard.

“Jackson got married?” he asks his wife before popping his face into the screen. “Son, you got married? Weren’t you just in Vegas?”

His mom smacks Jax’s dad’s chest and whines, “Dawson, I wanted to get married by Elvis!”

“Yeah, Dad. Didn’t you know Mom wanted to get married by Elvis?” Jax jokes, and my heart warms at the happiness his family so easily pours out onto one another.

“Now where the hell was I supposed to find an Elvis that could marry us in the middle of Montana?”

“Okay!” She waves her hands in the air. “We’re way off track here. Jackson? Theo? Are you two happy?”

Jax and I answer at the same time, “Yes.” They look at one another and smile. The resounding “aww” coming through the speaker has all of us laughing.

“Then that’s all that matters. Now, we’re going to let you two have some alone time. But I do expect to see pictures of my baby and my new son-in-law with Elvis!” The smirk on Catherine’s face matches the one Jackson wears when he is truly and wholly happy.

Like the one he’s got right now.

We hear a throat clear, and fuck, I forgot Bridget was still here...

Jax hurriedly tries to get his family off the phone as I head to the door where Bridget is standing. Behind me, Jax murmurs, “Okay, love you all. I’ll call you later!”

Bridget has a couple of bags and suitcases but is looking at me with a sincere expression. “I’m sorry, Theo.”

Despite everything, I want to comfort her. So, I wrap her in my arms and whisper, “I’m sorry, too.”

Without another word, she opens the door, walks through it, and closes it behind her. Just like that, it’s done. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought it would have been Bridget apologizing to me after all the horrible shit I’ve done this past year. But you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, or whatever that saying is. Her leaving without a fight will finally give Jax and I the alone time I’ve been begging for.

Denying myself of Jackson Baker has been the hardest thing I’ve done to this day, but when I turn around and he presses his body into mine, pushing my body into the front door with a thud, I send my thanks up to whoever the hell is listening.

* ? All Mine - Brent Faiyaz

CHAPTER 37

TOMORROW?

JACKSON

The door clicks shut, and I'm on him, pressing his body against the door by plastering my front to his. I press a heated kiss to his lips but pull away to see how he's feeling from all the chaos that just took place. "Well that was..."

"Yeah," he sighs, scrubbing his hand over his face.

? * "Want a drink?" I ask him. He looks at me deadpan, and I laugh. "Coffee then?"

"That literally sounds like heaven." Smiling, I turn on my heel and head toward the kitchen. Filling the kettle, I set it on the stove to boil some water and ready the dripper with a filter and some grounds. I reach into the cabinet and grab two mugs, but when I turn around to ask Theo if he wants any cream he has his arms crossed over his chest, and his face is pinched in confusion. "What?"

Slowly, he lowers his arms and moves toward me, stopping once he's about two feet away. "Ummm... how did you know where all of that was?"

Fuck.

I wasn't even thinking about what I was doing. I just... did it. "Would you believe me if I told you it was just a really good guess?" Theo raises his brow. "Fine. Ummm, so

you know when Clay and Rocky won the tournament last year?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay, well I got really drunk down at Jack’s that night. I don’t remember hardly anything from the time I left the bar to when I woke up on my floor the next morning.” The kettle starts to whistle behind us so I turn the burner off and pour some water over the grounds.

“What does that have to do with you knowing where all of my shit is?” Theo asks.

“Well, you see... Ugh, jesus christ I can’t believe this is happening... Well, when I woke up the next morning my laptop was open as the program I use to sometimes, maybe, possibly, tamper with security systems was running... and... well...”

“Holy fuck, just spit it out, Jackson.”

“I broke into your house in the middle of the night when I was drunk and put cameras everywhere and I’ve been watching you on them for months and I also have been spying on you on the security cameras in the athletic center and I also put one in your office and I know it’s a really big invasion of privacy and while part of me is sorry the other isn’t because even when I was royally pissed at you and wanted nothing to do with you I couldn’t shake the desire of wanting to just see you all the time so you can be mad at me if you want to and I probably deserve it but between this and the black eye I think that makes us pretty much even now don’t you? Okay, good. Glad that’s settled.”

Theo just looks at me slack jawed for a moment before asking, “Where?” I look up at the vents in the ceiling. His eyes follow mine, and he looks back at me and sighs. “Jackson...”

“I know, I know. I fucked up. But I did it when I was drunk, and they were already there. There’s not one in your bedroom or your bathroom, so it’s not like I watched you and Bridget have sex or anything, which I’m sort of gathering that never happened. Thank god. And I never stared at you naked... well, besides that one morning you spilled a bowl of oatmeal on your lap while you were eating breakfast in your underwear and took them off in the kitchen before you went back upstairs.”

“Jackson...”

“And I never showed it to anyone else, I swear. I’m the only one that ever looked. It wasn’t really that often really. Only like once, maybe twice a day. And when there were other students in your office I never watched because that’s a huge invasion of privacy. Which I realize is ironic...”

“Jax...”

“But it was bad enough I was spying on you, I didn’t want to make it worse, by watching some poor unsuspecting student and?—”

“JACKSON BAKER, WOULD YOU STOP TALKING!”

My jaw snaps shut as I stare at him wide-eyed. Breathing heavily through my nose as I try to replenish my lungs of the oxygen they just lost during that rant.

What the fuck was that all about anyway?

“It’s fine.”

“I don’t blame you, it really wasn’t very—Wait, it’s fine?”

Theo slowly moves toward me as he shrugs nonchalantly. “Yeah, it’s fine. I mean, I

should probably be more bothered by the fact that you've been spying on me for almost a year, but after everything I've done to you..." He reaches me but doesn't touch me. His green eyes just look deep into mine. "I'm choosing not to care."

"Y-you don't care?"

Theo shakes his head. "Nope."

"I'll take them down. I swear."

His fingers reach out to grab at the string of my sweatpants. "Well, maybe you could take them down... tomorrow?"

A slow smile spreads across my face. "Tomorrow, huh?"

Both of his hands find their way under my shirt and rest along my waist. "Tomorrow," he says softly. "I've had enough arguing. Enough apologizing. Enough wishing we would have done things differently. I just want us. You and me. No secret engagement. No being afraid I'm going to get fired. No wanting each other in secret. For once... just us. "

"You really want to do this now? After we just kicked your fiancée out of the house?"

"Ex-fiancée, but, yes," he says as he leans his face into mine.

"Before we've even figured out what we're really going to do?"

"Mhm," he replies as his lips ghost mine.

"But—"

He half-sobs, half-laughs against my lips. “Jax, please. We’ll deal with the rest of the questions tomorrow . Just shut up and fucking kiss me.”

Theo pulls his bottom lip between his teeth, and despite how mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted I am, the only thing I can think about is having it between mine. “I think you have yourself a deal, Mr. Young.”

* ? For You - Lithe, Roy Woods

CHAPTER 38

SMILE FOR THE CAMERA

THEODORE

The feel of Jax's lips on mine after all of this time has to be what heaven is like.

It's like a kind of euphoria I've never experienced.

Even just being in his presence is enough to feel like the high of a lifetime, and I truly never want to come down.

? * "Do the cameras record?" I murmur breathlessly against his lips. His brows bunch together as he pulls away slightly from our kiss.

"Y-yeah... why?"

"Oh, no reason," I say before reaching behind me, fisting my shirt between my shoulder blades and pulling it over my head, careful not to rip my glasses off my face. I'll need them to be able to see his expressions for what I'm about to do.

He takes the hint and does the same with a smile on his face. I stop and take in the sight that is Jackson Baker.

My husband.

Fuck, that feels good to even think, let alone be able to tell people that I'm lucky enough to be calling this man in front of me my husband. That thought stops me in my tracks. I would have never been happy being married to Bridget or really anyone other than Jax. I would've been ashamed to be anyone else's husband.

Despite us being naked in bed only mere hours ago, I didn't take the time to fully appreciate him. For just a moment, I let my eyes trail across his bare chest, tracing the lines of black ink as I go. There, over his heart, is a tattoo of a picturesque mountain range. One that I'm almost positive resembles the place he calls home. But, as much as I could stand here all day and just drink him in, I want to touch him even more.

As my hands find his waistband again, I hurriedly pull his shorts and boxers down, freeing his already hard cock. His shorts hit the ground around his ankles, and his dick bobs heavily between his muscular thighs.

"Theo..." My name is a plea falling from his lips.

"Jax," I plead his name, just as he did mine. I want him, no, I need him. His hips are bucking toward me trying to get our cocks to touch, even with my shorts still covering mine. "What do you need your husband to do?"

Urging him toward his answer, I get down on one knee, then the next, and look up at him, desperate for him to tell me what I want to hear.

He puts his hands on the counter on each side of the stove, careful not to burn his hands, leans back, and looks up at the vent. The same one I now know the little shit has been using to spy on me. A sinister grin takes over his face as his eyes meet mine once again. "I need your lips around my cock, Mr. Young. "

Not rushing this whatsoever, I let my hands roam from the middle of his thighs down to the side of his knees. I run the pad of my thumb over the vertical scar, causing

goosebumps to form across his skin. I press a gentle kiss to it before I look up at him. “I’ve wanted this cock of yours in my mouth for the past year. Now lean back, shut up, and look up at your camera. I don’t want one expression of yours to be missed.”

I smirk and nod my head to the ceiling, raising my eyebrows, trying to see if he wants to be a brat for me today. Another second passes, and then he slowly tilts his head back, and I have the best view in the goddamn world from down here on my knees.

My eyes fall from his face down the slope of his shoulders. My god those fucking shoulders. And his arms... the same arms that hold so much raw power. From there I trace the lines of his perfectly sculpted abs which lead to an even more perfect V-cut, of which points right to his juttied-out cock. The same one that’s merely a breath away from my lips. I exhale a ragged breath, and Jackson twitches at the sensation, before a shiver takes over his body.

Fuck .

I’ve got it bad.

Moving my hands to the backs of his legs, just below his ass, I pull him a little closer to me. I let my tongue trace over his slit, collecting the pre-cum that’s been begging for me to taste. This may be the first time I’m finally getting my tongue on him, but it certainly won’t be my last.

“Please, Theo. Please suck me... I can’t wait any longer.”

“You beg so pretty, though. What if I want to hear more?” But I don’t let him answer. I suck the head of his cock into my mouth, and he releases a moan that sends a wave of white-hot pleasure to my already hard dick.

I coat his cock in my saliva and start to work my hand up his shaft in time with my

mouth, and that seems to get the most reaction out of him.

He's already released his hold on the counter to thread his hands through my hair, moving my head exactly the way he wants it. Up and down his pulsing cock, while snapping his hips in perfect rhythm. Being controlled by him in this way feels so fucking good, I've already completely forgotten what I told him about looking at the camera.

He's fucking my mouth like a wild man, and I relish in it. Until now, I've only dreamed of this, and now that it's finally happening, I'm on the verge of coming in my fucking pants. Between the noises falling from his lips, him pulling at my hair as if he's afraid to let go, and knowing I'm being used to pleasure him... it's almost all too much.

I'm a fucking goner.

I'll never be the same.

From here on out I am no longer Theodore Young.

I'm Theodore Young, Jackson Baker's husband.

He continues pumping in and out of my throat before eventually holding my head in place, and I try my hardest not to gag. Instead, I swallow around him and he lets out a desperate groan. "Fuck—Theo, I'm... I'm going to?—"

He tries to pull from my mouth, but I grip the back of his thighs tighter, keeping him buried in my mouth. He moans as spurts of cum start spilling down my throat. I swallow every fucking drop. His release is barely finished when he demands, "Up. I need your cock in my mouth. Now."

I stand eagerly before we switch spots. My pants and boxers are down at my ankles before I can even blink. I tease, “Did you miss this cock, Jax?”

“Yes. So, so much. You’ll never know how hard it was staying away from you. When all I wanted every time I looked at you was to just be with you. It didn’t matter how pissed off I was...” He presses a gentle kiss against one hip bone. “Or how certain I was that I didn’t want anything to do with you. Whenever there was a moment where my brain was still...” His lips press against my other hip. “The first thing my thoughts went to... was you.”

“Jackson,” I say breathlessly, but his eyes are on my cock. “I’m—I’m not going to la—” I completely stop talking as he grips my cock and sucks me to the back of his throat. He moans around my length, and the vibrations have my toes curling against the cold tile floor. “Fucckkk, Jax, yes,” I hiss, as I grip the top of his messy black hair and start to move my hips in sync with his mouth.

He’s looking up at me, tears rimming his eyes from keeping me so deep in his throat, and I groan at the view.

I tip my head back, looking up at the ceiling and, in turn, looking right at the camera hidden in the vent right above us, and sigh with contentment.

Jax hollows his cheeks out and starts to roll my balls between his fingers. A moment later, his free hand finds my back hole. He doesn’t press inside, though. But just having him there, is enough to make my eyes cross with pleasure. “You’re going to make me come, Jax.”

He suctions even harder, rolls my balls a little tighter, and, like a lightning bolt has struck my lower back, my orgasm hits me faster than it ever has.

It’s so intense it feels like I come for minutes and not just seconds, and I ride that

wave over and over again until it washes me up on shore. But instead of it being the beautiful beach, I'm somewhere even better. In my home, with my husband.

With Jackson.

Jax stands before me with a smile so raw, so pure, that it almost makes me fall back to my knees. Because it's a smile I haven't seen on his face since I saw him in the grocery store when he got back from being in Montana over the summer. The summer he learned how to live without me. To be happy without me . But now... now he's here. And I finally get to bask in that happiness, because I get to witness it right in front of me.

I am now a part of his happiness.

What's more... he's letting me be.

* ? Or Nah (feat. The Weeknd, Wiz Khalifa, & DJ Mustard) - Remix - Ty Dolla \$ign,
The Weeknd, Wiz Khalifa, & DJ Mustard

CHAPTER 39

THE LOOK.

JACKSON

“I think I might throw up,” I say as Theo and I walk down the hallway toward Coach Taylor’s office.

“That makes two of us—Wait, I thought you were okay with all of this?” Theo stops in his tracks next to me, grabs my arm, and looks at me in a panic. “You can’t freak out. You’ve been the calm one. We told our parents. We told Bridget and this is when you decide to panic? Only one of us is allowed to panic at a time. I might lose my job. The panic is mine. You can’t panic, Jackson?—”

“Theo!” I give his shoulders a firm shake.

Holy shit is this what I sounded like yesterday?

“If you say the word panic one more time I might slap you. Take a fucking breath.”

He nods feverishly. “Right. Yeah. Okay.”

“I just meant that I don’t want him to give me the look . Clay was always on the receiving end of that one. I’ve always been the favorite.” I beam with pride for a split second, and Theo just rolls his eyes. “I’ve never been able to handle it. Anytime Mom or Dad gave me the look I folded faster than a card table at a frat party.”

“Jax... if anyone is going to get the look it’s probably going to be me.”

I think about it for a second. “Oh yeah, you’re probably right. Okay, let’s go.”

“Thanks for that,” he mumbles before following me.

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re a dick,” he snaps, even though I know there’s no real heat behind it.

“You sure like sucking my dick,” I murmur to myself.

“What was that?”

“Nothing!” The two of us stop in front of Coach’s door, and despite my best attempts to lighten the mood, I can tell Theo really is about to lose it. So before I knock on the door, I whisper softly, “It’s going to be fine. Whatever happens in here we will deal with it, together .”

“I know,” he whispers.

Reaching out, I brush the back of his hand with my fingertip before knocking on the door. “Come on in, boys,” Coach’s voice booms. “I didn’t expect you guys for a little bit yet so just give me one second to get the tapes pulled up.”

I push the door open and peek my head in. “Hey, Coach, Austin actually isn’t here yet, but umm... well, we wanted to talk to you.”

“We?”

“Yeah.” I push the door open the rest of the way so Theo comes into view. “We.”

* * *

“So let me get this straight,” Taylor says as he massages his temples. “The two of you have been dating in secret since you hurt your knee, got drunk while we were in Vegas, and got married. Even though you”—he points at me—“should be focusing on school and building a future for yourself, and you”—his finger moves to Theo—“are, were, engaged to be married and are a member of my staff.”

We decided to spare everyone all of the sordid details about everything that went on between the two of us. It won’t do anyone any good, and since nobody, besides Clay, even knew that something was up we figured it would probably be best.

Everyone is already going to be pissed enough we hid this from them. The last thing they need to do is be mad at Theo when I’ve already moved past it. Mostly.

“Yup, sounds about right,” I say. “Look, Coach, I?”

“Nope,” he cuts me off and looks at Theo. “I want to hear from you.”

Theo lets out a shaky sigh, and out of the corner of my eye I watch as he begins nervously bouncing his leg. And even though I’m genuinely worried Coach is about to give me that look so fiercely I will want to crawl in a hole to die, my desire to comfort Theo is my main concern. So, I gently place my hand on his thigh. His leg immediately stops moving, and I listen as he fills his chest with a long and slow deep breath.

“Listen, Coach I—” One more deep breath. “I understand that what we did, what I did is wrong. Jackson is a student at this school and more importantly, an athlete I’ve treated. I take full responsibility for the fact that I crossed a very clear line when I shouldn’t have. But at the same time... I’m not sorry.”

Coach steeples his hands together. “You’re not?”

“No.” Theo suddenly sits up a little straighter, and I give his leg a gentle squeeze. “I’m not sorry I met Jackson. I’m not sorry that the two of us formed a relationship. I’m not sorry I ended my engagement when there shouldn’t have even been one in the first place. And I am most definitely not sorry I married Jackson on a drunken night out in Vegas. Okay... well... maybe I am a little sorry that it was done by an Elvis impersonator and not—you know what, not the point. The point is, I’m not sorry. I love him. I think I’ve always loved him. And now that we’re married I get to love him until the end of time.”

Ummmm... did he just say—holy shit.

I can feel my eyes wanting to bug out of my head, but as far as Coach Taylor is concerned the two of us should have said that to one another a million times by now, and this is most definitely not the first time those words have come out of his mouth.

Because what person in their right mind would say that RIGHT NOW for the first time?!

A moment of regret flashes across Theo’s face, but like me, he does his best to cover it up.

Coach Taylor just stares at us from across the desk.

Unable to take the silence any longer, Theo blurts out, “I am willing and prepared to tender my resignation today if I must. But we thought you deserved to be the first to know.”

Coach sits back in his chair. It’s quiet for a moment, save for the ticking of his clock, before he finally speaks. “Not necessary.”

“What?” Theo and I both say in unison.

“No resignation necessary, Young. Technically, because you are school staff and not a member of the faculty, this relationship is not an abuse of power. Jackson had nothing to gain from this relationship.”

Ain’t that the truth.

Theo forcefully elbows me in the side. Shit, I must have said that out loud.

Coach gives me a “what the hell” look before continuing. “Anyway... this one is also over the age of eighteen and clearly old enough to make his own decisions. So, while I don’t necessarily agree with the way the two of you handled things, this is not a do-or-die situation. However, first thing tomorrow, you will disclose this relationship with one of the school’s HR representatives. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” we both reply.

“And.” His eyes narrow. Fuck, there it is. “I will not tolerate any sort of nefarious behavior when you are supposed to be practicing or playing or while you are supposed to be working. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” I rush out.

“Good. Now, you stay, and you”—he looks at Theo—“can leave. Ward should be here soon, and we have film to go over.”

Theo looks at me for a moment, silently asking if I’m comfortable with him leaving. “I’ll come find you when I’m done,” I tell him softly.

“Okay. I’ll meet you back at my house. Wait, our house?”

“Jesus christ,” Coach groans.

Suddenly it dawns on me that I haven’t even told Emerson I’m married, let alone the fact that I’m probably moving out since it would make literally zero sense for Theo to move into our house.

Great. Add that to the never-ending list of things we need to do.

And because now is clearly not the time to figure all that out, I simply smile and say, “Okay.”

Theo nods at Coach Taylor before heading for the door, but as he begins to open it, the deep voice on the other side of the desk stops him in his tracks. “If you boys are happy then I’m happy for you. But Young...”

“Yeah, Coach?” Theo asks.

“Hurt my boy again, and you’ll have me in the line of people you’ll have to deal with.”

This time my eyes practically pop out of my head. There’s no hiding my surprise. But I should have known Coach noticed there was more going on with me last year than just a hurt leg. He sees everything.

I look between the two of them only to find Theo simply nodding in understanding, a small smile crawling across his face. “I won’t, Sir. But even if I did, I’d gladly welcome the invitation.”

And even though he’s not looking at me, I smile softly at Theo before he walks out the door. Not more than a few seconds later Austin comes walking in. Coach gestures to the open seat next to me and spins his laptop around on his desk. “Alright, boys.

Let's start with some of your serve receives.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:44 am

I 'm barely out of the sports complex before my phone starts ringing in my pocket. I reach in and hit accept without even thinking to look at who it is. However, it doesn't take me long to figure it out because not more than half a second later Emerson's voice is yelling through my headphones, "YOU GOT FUCKING MARRIED?"

Well that solves the problem of me having to tell him.

"Wait, that's why we're calling him?" Clay? "Actually, double wait, YOU GOT MARRIED AND I WASN'T THERE TO BE YOUR BEST MAN?"

? * "Who the hell says you'd be the best man?" Emerson asks.

Clay barks back, "Oh shove it, Emmy. We all know I'd be Jackson's best man. You're just jealous he loves me the most."

"Who got married?" Rocky's voice echoes in the background.

"Oh hold on, the twins are calling," Emerson says. "Let me patch them in."

"Oh my god, please don't?—"

"Hey, what's going on?" Emerson asks. "Oh, hey, Clay!"

"Hey, bud," Clay answers. "Hey, Bry."

"Sup, Clay. What's happening? Why are we?—"

“WAIT! ” Clay shouts. “Who in the flying fuck did you get married to?”

“The athletic trainer,” Emerson says. “The one with the blond hair and?”

“Young?” Clay instantly sounds perturbed. “You got married to Theodore Young?”

“You married a guy?!” Bryson asks. “Ouch! What the hell was that for?”

“You can’t ask it like that,” Grayson scolds. “But also, like... you married a guy?”

“Who cares if he married a guy, HE DIDN’T TELL ANY OF US.” I genuinely think Emerson might pop one of my ear drums.

“AND DIDN’T HAVE ME THERE AS HIS BEST MAN!” Or maybe it’ll be Clay.

“GOD DAMN IT, CLAY. YOU WOULD NOT BE HIS BEST MAN!” Nope. It’ll be Emerson.

“Is anyone going to let me speak?” I ask, but the four of them continue to bicker back and forth, as if I’m not the whole reason they’re calling me in the first place. I realize I’m rounding the corner to our block. But just as I’m about to cross the intersection to my side of the street, I realize that, for once, the little yellow house is where I’m supposed to go. So, I continue to walk down the block on the side of the street I’ve stopped myself from crossing for much longer than I’d care to admit. Because, that little yellow house... it’s now home to a person that loves me.

Theodore Young said he loves me.

Am I ready to say it back ?

As hard as I’ve worked to put everything that’s happened behind me, I just... I don’t

know if I'm there yet. I don't know if I'm ready to fully trust that he's willing to give up the life he thought he was supposed to have... for me.

So, I can't say it. Not yet. Not until I know for sure.

"Jackson, are you even listening?" Clay asks.

"No I'm not listening because I quite literally have not said more than ten words since this phone call started." Theo's house is only a few yards away, and I suddenly am no longer in the mood to entertain this band of hooligans. "Guys, I have to go. Emerson, I will come over tomorrow and talk to you, I swear. Goodbye everyone. Love you," I sing-song as they continue to shout at me, but I reach back in my pocket and hang up anyway. I'm about to open the front door when I realize I don't have a key. But just as I'm reaching out to knock it swings wide open. Theo is standing on the other side of it, dangling a gold key between his fingers. "Need one of these?"

I beam from ear to ear and snatch it from his fingers. "I sure did. Would hate to be locked out of my new house. But—" I move toward him, pushing him backward into the house. And once I'm fully inside I kick the door closed behind me. "Right now all I want to do is lock myself in."

Without a word, Theo reaches behind me and turns the lock.

* ? Who are you? - Bad Omens

CHAPTER 41

PREPPED AND READY

THEODORE

The door clicks shut, and a wicked smile finds my lips. I look right into Jax's eyes and slide the deadbolt into place. I've got plans, and no one needs to be interrupting.

There's already heat in his gaze, but I swear on all things holy, this man just growled under his breath

? * "You're moving in here." I hold my hand up to stop his arguments. "And I know I dropped the L-bomb earlier in Coach's office, but I wanted to tell you to take your time. No rushing. But just know I can and will love you enough for the both of us."

I truly hope he knows that I will wait until the end of time for him to confess his love for me. But I also understand why he's hesitant. I fucked him up, in a big way. I'm just thankful he's even talking to me, let alone married to me, and in the same house as me

I step closer, closing the gap between us. I press him into the door and smash my lips to his. His tongue dances with mine, taking charge like I knew he would.

Our hands can't find enough of one another, but he pulls away from my lips far sooner than I would like. "I can't believe I'm actually in here... well, with you knowing, I mean. I can't believe I'm in your house?—"

“Our house,” I correct.

With the sassiest eye roll, he repeats, “Our house. And thank you.”

“For what?” I ask.

“Thank you for giving me time. I know this entire marriage thing was my idea, but thank you for not pushing me... for giving me time to figure out how I feel.”

“Of course,” I say softly. “But in the meantime... I have a little surprise for you.” My hands fidget nervously on his lean waist. “I’ve prepped and put a plug in to get ready for you when you finally came home.” I’m hoping he’s ready to take the next step with me, but if he’s not, I’ll give him the time there as well.

I would do just about anything for Jackson Baker.

Jax’s wanton moan rumbles deep in his chest as he presses his body tighter against mine. “Is that why you were out of the office so fast? You had to come and prep my hole for me?”

Okay, I know I said what I just said, but hearing those words fall from his lips is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. Who knew Jackson Baker, the epitome of the “boy next door” had such a dirty mouth. I’m so fucking here for it.

I haven’t been with a man in years—actually, anyone, for that matter—and I wanted to make sure I was ready before we finally made the leap to have sex, which is why I’ve spent the majority of the afternoon prepping. I wanted to make this experience as enjoyable as possible. I know he’ll take the time before, but I also know how much sexual tension has been building between the two of us.

I want him in me. No, I need him in me.

The only response I can manage at the moment is a frantic nod, and he groans as I rock my hips into his. Wrapping his big hand around my wrist, he starts dragging me toward the bedroom. Once we're there he has me stand at the edge of my— our —bed while he stands a couple of feet back and just stares at me. "Strip. Now," Jax commands, and I waste no time.

I pull my shirt off before sliding my sweats and boxers off at the same time.

Jax follows suit. "On the bed. Show me."

I lay back on the bed, and far slower than I should, I pull my legs up to my sides. Leaving all of me on full display for Jax to take in.

"Fucckkkk," Jax moans while swiping a hand down his face.

I feel his hands rub up the back of my thighs, pushing them further up, while I simultaneously try not to let the blush I can feel crawl across my face from being so on display ruin the moment. Jax murmurs, "I don't want to rush this, Theo, but fuck. I don't know if I'm gonna be able to control myself."

I smile up at him. "Then don't."

He grunts, and I watch as his knees hit the end of the bed. Just when I think he's going to pay some attention to my ass, he shocks me by sucking my cock deep into his mouth.

I hiss, "Fuck, Jax."

Reaching between my legs, he grabs the base of the plug and begins moving it in and out of my ass as he's swallowing my cock. The plug is bouncing off my prostate, and I'm seeing fucking stars. "I'm not going to la—" I stop my sentence as he pops his

mouth off my cock. “But... I need to come so bad.”

I take a few deep breaths, desperate for this moment to last as long as possible.

“We’re just getting started, Babe, relax for me.” I watch, mesmerized, as he stands up and fists his cock, pumping it up and down as he continues to smirk down at me. “You like what you see, pretty boy?”

I whimper.

Yes, whimper ...

I’m not ashamed. I believe the sight in front of me would bring even the strongest man to his knees.

Jax huffs out in annoyance, “I should’ve put cameras in here.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t want to see you fucking... her.”

“Yeah, that never happened,” I reassure him.

Jax’s brows pull together. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Now no more about her. I need you, Jax.”

That gets his attention back on the moment I’ve waited so long for. He grabs the plug again, staring transfixed as he pulls it out.

“Lube?”

“Behind you on the dresser.” I watch his muscular back flex as he reaches to grab the bottle, pouring a healthy amount onto his shaft, working it up and down his full length.

He steps back to the end of the bed and looks me in the eyes. “Are you ready for me?” I nod my head. “Words, Mr. Young. Or you won’t get this cock.”

“Yes. Please, Jax,” I beg, and right as the words leave my lips, he presses the head of his cock against my back entrance. “Take me. Fuck me, Jax. Make me yours.” And make me his, he does.

I do my best to relax, knowing that tensing up is only going to make this more difficult.

“Oh, does my husband want his hole to be wrecked?”

I nod because— yes. A million times yes.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he gets his hands positioned beside my head. I can’t help but admire the muscles sculpting his arms as I allow my hands to roam them. I can feel every perfectly defined ridge, and I’m obsessed with the way he feels beneath my touch.

He begins slowly pumping in and out of me, gently, and I’m grateful he’s letting my body adjust to his size before pounding into me ruthlessly, but I can tell it’s taking everything in him to hold back. He pauses for a moment, seated all the way to his pelvis, resting on my balls, so I give him the go-ahead. “Fuck me, Jax. Fuck me like I know you want to. Don’t hold back, I can handle it.”

He sits back on his knees, pulling my ass up with his hands on my hips, ready to start hammering into me. “Hold on.”

With Jax still firmly gripping my hips, I pull my legs to my chest. This position gives him the perfect angle to rub against my prostate over and over, causing me to tip my head back as pure euphoria washes over me.

“Rub your cock, now.” I obey, using the precum that’s leaking at the tip to coat my hand. I’m teetering at the edge of my release.

I’m back to begging. “Make me come, please, Jax.”

“Come, Theo. I’m right behind you.” He slows his thrusts down slightly but keeps the most glorious pressure on my prostate, and I twist the head of my cock.

“Come... Now.” And I do just that. Thick ropes of come spurt out onto my stomach and chest, and it seems the view of me coming is what finally pulls Jax over the edge.

He pumps one more time and buries himself as deep as possible, groaning while his cock twitches and pulses inside of me. Filling me with him .

He lets out a ragged breath and pulls out of me, holding my ass cheeks open and watching himself drip out of me. “This is the view I want—always. My cum dripping out of my husband.”

* * *

I’m barely cleaned up and out of the shower when I hear Jax’s phone ringing.

“It’s my mom; I’m gonna answer it.” He slides the bar across the screen, answering the call while I’m toweling off and getting dressed for bed.

“Jax, baby, I just got off the phone with Clay, and well—We’ve decided you need an official wedding. So, we’ve planned a little backyard wedding for you and Theo!

Spring break, so the both of you will need to be here. Obviously .” Her soft giggle fills the line. “There won’t be a wedding without the grooms. Oh! And we called Theo’s parents. They will be coming too.”

My eyes go wide and I mouth, “How did she get their numbers?”

Jax rolls his eyes. “I have no idea,” he says quietly.

It genuinely doesn’t even pay for Jax to say no, because he knows he will quite literally break her heart. He already deprived her of an Elvis wedding. We can’t say no to a real one.

“I should’ve never given your number to Clay. The two of you are nothing but trouble,” Jax says to his mom, but he can’t do it without chuckling.

“Clay and I are not trouble. Just ask him. He’ll tell you. But he did say he calls best man spot and that he was willing to fight Emerson over it...” She’s laughing, knowing exactly how Clay and Emerson fight over Jax.

Jax rolls his eyes, blowing a huff of air out. “They keep this up, and there won’t be any best men.” They talk for a couple more minutes before saying their goodbyes.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks me hesitantly.

I shrug. “Might as well. We’re going to have to meet each other’s families eventually. Might as well do it with a wedding.”

He lets out an exhausted sigh. “If you say so.” Jax pops off the bed. “I’m going to go shower.”

“Alright,” I say as he closes the bathroom door. Once I hear it latch, I snatch Jax’s

phone and go to his recent calls. I copy his mom's number into my phone and put his back where I found it.

I'm giving my man the engagement he should've had.

* ? Better Off - VOILà

CHAPTER 42

SEE YOU FOR DINNER

JACKSON

I'm in the middle of making breakfast when Theo finally comes downstairs. "Good morning," he says sleepily before wrapping his arms around me and peeking over my shoulder. "Waffles?"

I shut the waffle maker and turn my head to look at him. "Protein waffles. Cottage cheese, oatmeal, and eggs. Little splash of vanilla and some cinnamon, top it with some fruit and you have a delicious and nutritious breakfast."

Theo scrunches his face in disgust. "No thanks. I'll just have some?—"

"Eggs on toast? Yeah, I made it already." I nod to the kitchen island where his plate is sitting covered with some tinfoil.

"It really is creepy how much you know about me," he says as he sits down on the stool at the island. I don't miss how his face lights up when he uncovers his plate, though.

"Yeah, well"—I take a sip of my coffee—"I'm a good observer."

"More like a good stalker," he mumbles as he takes a giant bite of his food.

“What was that?”

“Hmmm? Nope. Nothing.”

I narrow my eyes playfully and smile. “Coffee?”

“Love some,” he replies.

“Want creamer or protein powder?”

“Ummm... creamer. What the hell is with all the protein?”

I pour him a cup and set it on the counter in front of him. “You do know I’m an athlete right?”

“Yeah, what does—oh, nevermind. Dumb question.”

I shoot him a wink. “Anyway, I have to go lift weights this morning before class, and then I have practice at three. You coming to our practice today?”

“No,” he replies with his mouth full. “I have to go to the girls basketball practice this afternoon. One of them strained her hamstring and three of them are working with sprained ankles. Jack”—who is one of the other athletic trainers on staff—“is going to need some extra help.”

“Alright. Well, after practice I’m going to go talk to Emerson about everything then... well... pack up my stuff and bring it here I guess?”

“Okay,” Theo answers casually.

“Just okay?” I ask.

Theo does a double take before smiling softly and setting down his silverware. Finally, he decides to swallow his food before he speaks. “We’re married. You’re my husband now, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to live here? There’s no pressure. If you’d rather live across the street until you’re more comfortable, that is totally understandable. I think I’ve learned my lesson by pushing you to do things you don’t want to do.”

I huff a faint laugh. “Do-do you want me here?”

Without hesitation he answers, “Of course I do.”

“Then... yeah, I think I do want to live here. With you.”

“Perfect.” He picks his fork back up and shoves yet another bite into his mouth. “I have an office I never use. I’ll clean it out before I go to work today. You can set all of your computer equipment up in there.”

I widen my eyes for a moment at how in-stride he is taking all of this. But now that I think about it, he was living with a woman he didn’t even want to be with. So, I suppose moving me in is no issue. “Oh, well, thank you.”

“Of course,” he answers, before taking his last bite, picking up his plate, and putting it in the dishwasher. “Thanks for breakfast.”

I turn around and lean against the counter. “You’re welcome.”

He comes to me, stopping only once his lips ghost mine. “Enjoy your breakfast.” He kisses me, the taste of his eggs coating my lips, before grabbing his coffee and

heading upstairs as he calls over his shoulder, “Have a good day at school, Honey.”

“Y-you, too.” I stand there slack-jawed for a moment. Completely perplexed by how... easy that all felt. If I’m being honest, the entirety of the last seventy-two hours has been a complete contrast to our relationship over the last year and a half, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t giving me a tiny bit of whiplash.

Yet... as strange as it all feels, it also feels... so right.

And because the entirety of our relationship has been nothing but questioning every move, every touch, every encounter, I decide to simply bask in the simplicity of the moment. So, I plate my waffle, enjoy my breakfast, and go about my day.

And later that day, after I fill Emerson in and listen to him complain endlessly that I got married and didn’t tell him—which I do admittedly feel a little bad about—I pack up my belongings and bring them over to Theo’s house.

Our house.

After I spend hours setting up my new office and unpacking my clothes into Theo’s magically half-empty closet, the two of us make chicken parmesan for dinner, followed by cuddling up on the couch to a movie. Which admittedly resulted in a very heavy makeout session twenty minutes in, which may or may not have resulted in sex on the living room floor, before we went to bed.

And for the next three weeks that’s exactly how our days went. Blissfully and unapologetically simple .

CHAPTER 43

THE PLANE BATHROOM?!

THEODORE

“F uccckk,” I hiss while holding onto Jax’s hair as he bobs up and down my cock in the airplane bathroom. He wanted to join the mile-high club, and, well... who am I to say no?

He hums around my cock, and I can feel the vibrations down to my toes. Jax knows what he’s doing. And judging by the way he’s looking up at me with those damn blue eyes and smirking around my cock, he fucking knows it.

“You like sucking your husband’s cock, don’t you?” He nods around my length. “Of course you do, my pretty little cock whore.”

“Mmm,” Jax hums again.

He picks up his speed and starts to hollow his cheeks. For a second—and a second only—I tip my head back onto the mirror behind me, basking in the pleasure that is Jax’s mouth.

After a moment, I slowly drop my head to look back down at him, and growl, “Swallow me like the whore you know you are.” Jax lets out a hum and whimper mixed up in one, finally pulling me over the edge. I drive my cock as deep into him as it will go and spill my release down his throat.

Jax stands to his full height, which is quite the task in a plane bathroom, and smashes his lips to mine. The taste of me in his mouth while he ruts his pulsing cock against me is enough to make me want to drop right to my knees, but we're already pushing it, so I hastily pull away so as not to be tempted further.

Grabbing him through his sweatpants, I whisper, "This cock is mine when we get to your house."

He chuckles before asking, "What? You want me to fuck you in my parents house?"

"Wait? I thought we were staying in the loft above one of the barns? Jackson, please do not tell me we're spending our second wedding weekend down the hallway from your parents. I might literally die of embarrassment."

He playfully slaps me on the chest and snorts a laugh. "We are, I just wanted to see you spaz for a second."

"Okay"—I point a finger at him—"that was mean."

He winks before pulling the small bathroom door open and sliding out in front of me, and, after I check that no one is looking, I follow right behind him.

Emerson's sitting next to the window in our row, and I can practically feel his glare burning a hole in the side of my head. "What the hell did the two of you just do?"

Jax and I look at one another and answer in unison, "Nothing."

* * *

We've just picked up our bags and are heading out of the Billings airport when I see Emerson sprinting toward a random man and grabbing him in a hug. As we get closer

to them, I realize this isn't a random man; this is their dad, Dawson Baker. Once we reach him, Jax wastes no time wrapping him up in a hug too, mumbling into his shoulder about how much he's missed him, and then, Dawson's eyes are on me.

Setting my bags down, I hold out my hand. "Mr. Baker. It's so nice to finally meet you."

He lets go of his sons and eyes my hand for a moment before gripping it and yanking me into his body much like he just did his own children. "Theo, you'll learn fast that we're a hugging family around here, and that includes you now." He holds me out in front of him by my shoulders. "And it's Dawson, please." He shoots me a wink, and in that moment, with that same playful smile, and those damn dimples, I realize how much he looks like Jackson. A spitting image really.

He claps me on the shoulder before bending over to pick up one of the bags. "Let's go, guys. Your parents are already at the ranch and waiting to see you," Dawson says as he points to me. His finger swings between all three of us as he tells us, "And if I don't get you home soon I think your mother might actually die of excitement."

After a while in the car, Dawson turns down one gravel road, then another, and another. And once we reach the last gravel road, I realize it isn't a road at all. It's the driveway to their ranch. But when I look out the window, there's nothing but endless pastures covered in what little snow remains, intermingled with flowers that are doing their best to bloom. But the mountains in the background, those are still capped in snow and seem like they reach the sun as far as the eye can see. A few minutes later, a large house comes into view. It looks like something you'd see off of Yellowstone .

And I'm not even over exaggerating .

But at the same time... I can tell, regardless of how grand the house seems, it's the definition of a home. And the realization that this place belongs to people I now get

to call family, hurts my cheeks I'm smiling so big.

Once Dawson puts the truck in park, he, Emerson, and Jax climb out, but I just sit there, staring at the beauty of it all out the open truck door. Finally, Jax bends over and sticks his head inside. "Come on, Babe." My megawatt smile remains intact as I wrap my hand around his and climb out of the truck.

The sound of laughter that meets my ears as we walk through their front door quite literally warms my chest. And when we round the corner to the kitchen, I find my mom, and a woman who has the same eyes as Jackson, talking animatedly at the kitchen island. Despite the fact that the two of them have known one another less than eight hours, it looks as if they're already thick as thieves.

Jax sets his bag on the floor and clears his throat, and the two of them finally notice our presence. "Oh, Jax, I've missed you!" She sets her glass of wine on the counter and hops out of her chair.

"Hey, Momma," Jax says as he wraps her up in a deep hug.

"Let me see your ring!" she shouts. Jax pulls away and puts his left hand up, wiggling his fingers before her eyes. "Oh, it's even prettier in person, Jax."

I look around the two of them and spot my mom, who's smiling just as big as I am. I walk over to her with my arms out wide. She's up from her seat before I reach her and is wrapping me up in her the same way she's done since I was little. "I've missed you, Mom," I whisper into her hair, closing my eyes and trying to hold back the sudden tears that want to escape.

"I've missed you too, sweet boy." My nose stings with unshed tears. My mom tilts her head looking somewhere behind me, and I don't even realize my dad is sitting at the table behind us on the other side of the room.

Dad rises from the table and makes his way over to us. For a moment, I'm wildly nervous about how this interaction is going to go, but much to my surprise, he wraps me in his arms the same as my mom just did. I couldn't even tell you the last time I got a hug from him.

Since I was a teenager our relationship has always felt... so... professional.

Then, Dad mutters something in my ear that I think I'll remember until the day I die. "I'm so happy to see you happy."

We hug for a moment longer before the two of us clear our throats and separate.

"Mom, Dad, this is Jax." I smile while introducing my husband to my parents.

Before I can say anything else, Dad surprises me, yet again. "Anyone that has my son looking like this is truly a blessing. I can see the love between the two of you already, and you've been here all of five minutes. All we ever wanted was this for you, Theo."

Yep, here are the tears.

I'll never know how he knew I was waiting on him to reassure me and my decisions. But that's exactly what he did. "Thanks, Dad."

This is going to be a million times better than I could have ever even imagined.

Now I just have to get my plan to work out perfectly...

CHAPTER 44

FOR REAL THIS TIME

JACKSON

“O kay!” Mom claps her hands together. “You two go up to the loft and get ready for the rehearsal dinner.”

Smirking, I side-eye Dad who simply smiles and shrugs before nodding back to Mom. Silently signaling me to pay attention. I balk at her but feel the need to clarify. “We’re having a rehearsal dinner? How much rehearsing could be needed for a small backyard wedding?”

Mom scrunches up her face. “Well...”

Dad, Emerson, Ronald, and Theo all chuckle softly. I sigh but can’t seem to wipe the smile off my face. “Mom...”

“I may have invited a few more people than we originally talked about.” She pinches her finger and thumb together as she attempts to shuffle behind Dad.

“ Mommmm....” I groan, because I know exactly what that means. She basically invited all of Billings.

“Don’t you try to hide behind me,” Dad says through a laugh. “I told you not to.”

Mom throws her hands in the air in exasperation. “Well, I’m sorry. My oldest son is getting—er got married already and—that’s besides the point! My oldest son is getting married! I’m soooooo sorry if I want everyone to see my baby boy marry the man of his dreams.”

I cannot even deal. But, I’m also not surprised in the slightest. As big as Billings is, it still seems as if everybody knows everybody, and what’s more... my mother knows everybody. I should have known that this wasn’t going to be a small function.

I look around the room to find every single person is smiling at her and more than happy to go along with my mom’s schemes. Even the Youngs. So, I then look at Theo, silently asking if he’s okay with the spectacle this is about to become. His eyes search mine, and the smile he’s had permanently glued to his face since we got here remains intact.

With an agreeable sigh, I walk to Mom, put my hands on her shoulders and say, “I’m sure it will be beautiful, Momma,” and kiss her on the cheek.

She practically beams. “Thank you,” she says softly. “Now, off you go. Go, go, go.”

We give everyone our “see you later,” but I don’t miss the mischievous look my mom gives Theo. It’s the same look she used to give Dad when she would try to “fix” something around the house without letting one of us help her, only for her to ultimately make it worse and need to hide the evidence.

I’ve seen that look so many times I am positive that she has something else up her sleeve.

But what I’m not positive of is what it could be that involves Theo.

* * *

“Okay.” I look over my shoulder at Theo as he stands on the step below me, my hand stilled on the doorknob. “Once you see how nice it is in here, don’t get the idea that Mom is going to allow us to stay out here every time we visit. Because if I don’t sleep in my childhood bedroom at Christmas her nostalgia might literally kill her.”

A soft chuckle rumbles in Theo’s chest. “Just open the door.”

I turn the knob and push the door open, and I’m immediately hit with the glow of what might be a thousand lit candles. They’re everywhere. On the floor. On the counters. On the coffee table. Hell, I can even see them coming from the bathroom. I take a few steps into the room, my jaw open in awe and confusion. “I think this might have been my mother’s doing,” I say as I slowly turn back toward Theo. “She likes to play cup?—”

Right there in front of me, bags left in the entryway, is Theo down on one knee, a soft smile covering his face. ? * “I might have helped her with this one.”

“What did you—When did you—How did you?”

“I got her number out of your phone the first night you stayed over.”

I narrow my eyes playfully. “You do know we’re already married, right?”

“Mhm.”

“And we’re going to have a wedding. Like, tomorrow.”

“Mhmmm.”

“And—”

“Jackson Baker, if you ask one more question I might slap you.” I tip my head back in laughter as he uses the words I said to him when he was panicking in front of Coach’s office just a couple of weeks ago. Regaining my composure, I run my fingers across my lips, mimicking zipping them closed, and throwing away the key. “I just”—he takes a deep breath—“I wanted to do something the right way... for once.”

I think my heart may literally melt into a puddle onto this floor.

“When it comes to you, I have done everything wrong since the very first day I stomped across the street and into your house. Countless times I misstepped, and countless times you gave me chance after chance. And yet, I somehow did everything wrong. But I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I did two things right. Do you know what those are?”

Tears sting at my eyes, and I fight back a sob as I shake my head. “No.”

“The first... being completely and irrevocably in love with you from the first time I saw you out my living room window. I might have not known it then, but looking back on it now, there’s no other word to describe what I felt for you. I love you, Jackson Baker. And while I’ll never stop being sorry for all of the things I did to you, I’ll never be sorry for loving you even when I shouldn’t have.”

Fuck, there it is .

A broken sob falls from my lips, and two small tears stream down my cheeks. “And the second thing?” I manage to choke out.

His smile gets even wider. “Marrying you in front of that ridiculous Elvis impersonator and making you my husband.”

Ah shit. More tears.

“So, Jax. Love of my life. My husband. Will you do me the honor of staying married to me?”

I nod frantically, and Theo is up off his knee and in front of me in a matter of seconds. Holding my face in his hands, he asks, “Yes?”

“Yes,” I say breathlessly, before he’s crashing his lips to mine.

The two of us kiss so deeply, so intensely, that I know nothing will ever compare to this moment right here.

All too soon, though, he pulls his mouth from mine. “Oh, one more thing.”

“What else could there possibly be?” I ask with a laugh.

“After you graduate in the spring... and if it’s something you would want.... We’re moving here.”

I don’t think I heard that right. “W-what did you just say?”

“Billings has a division one college. I called. They have an athletic training position available for the next school year. Your mom said we could stay up here until we find a place. And you can work an IT job from anywhere. And if you want to do that and work on the ranch with your dad, that’s more than possible.”

“Theo, why would you?—”

“Because I saw how at peace you were when you came back from being here all summer. I see how you light up whenever you talk to your family. And in the thirty minutes we’ve been here I’ve never seen you look more... more whole . And besides, the only thing that’s worth me staying in Pensacola for is you. And if here is where

you want to be, then I'll be right here with you."

Suddenly, the only thing I want to say is—"I love you."

Theo's eyes widen, and he lets out a ragged breath. "You love me?"

"Yeah, Theo. I love you." It's me who's kissing him now, and I pour everything I have into it, because I love Theodore Young.

Despite all of the reasons that I shouldn't... I really fucking love him.

"So is that a yes, too?" he mumbles against my lips.

"Hell yes that's a yes," I answer breathlessly. "But... who's going to tell Clay?"

Theo rolls his eyes and places his hands on the center of my chest. "Yeah, we're so not talking about Clay right now."

Then, my soon-to-be-still husband pushes us toward the bed.

* ? The Good I'll Do - Zach Bryan

CHAPTER 45

WEDDING FESTIVITIES

JACKSON

“Say it again,” ? * Theo mumbles against my mouth before kissing me once more, ripping his lips away. His hands find the hem of my shirt, but he doesn’t move. His eyes locked on mine.

“I love you,” I tell him softly. He bites his bottom lip and lifts my shirt over my head. Once my arms are free of the sleeves, I reach out, take his glasses off, and gently set them on the nightstand beside the bed. “I love you,” I say again before running my lips along his jaw. “I love you.” Then down and across his neck. “I love you.” And back up the other side until my lips ghost against the shell of his ear. “Theodore Young, I fucking love you.”

He lets out a wanton groan and pushes me backward so my back lands on the mattress. Theo climbs on top of me, straddling my waist with his legs. The two of us kiss one another with a hunger like I’ve never experienced. It’s even different from the first time we had sex. This time it doesn’t feel like a bomb waiting to go off from months and months of built up tension. No. Right now... there’s a different kind of passion. One filled with love and yearning. The kind of passion I’ve wanted all of my life but was starting to think I would have to be happy to live without. The kind of passion I hope I get to experience every day until the day I die.

The kind of passion I only ever want to experience with him.

My husband .

The object of all my desires.

The man who vexes me more than anyone I've ever known.

The man who quite literally turned my world upside down in the most unexpected way.

The man who loves me.

And more importantly... the man that I love.

Theo's hands roam my bare torso, as I attempt to reach for the hem of his shirt. But I can't find it quick enough, so instead, I grip the front of it and give it one firm yank, ripping it right down the middle.

"I only brought a few of those," he groans breathlessly.

"I don't fucking care. I'll buy you twenty more." My hands find purchase on his back, the heat of his skin melding perfectly against mine.

Wrapping my legs around him, I swiftly roll us over so he's beneath me. "As much as I wish we did, we don't have a lot of time," I pant.

"Better make it fast," he answers with a devious grin.

I kiss my way down his chest, letting my tongue drag over his skin when I reach his abs. Relishing in the trail of goosebumps that follows. I make quick work of the drawstring on his joggers and stand at the foot of the bed. Without any hesitation, I pull his pants and briefs off, letting them pool on the floor, followed by his socks and

shoes. Theo raises a brow at me, and I do the same with the rest of my own clothes, but not before grabbing the small packet of lube I have tucked away in my wallet. And despite the small chill in the air, both of our cocks are hard as steel.

Thankfully, because we don't have time for much else.

Theo licks his lips as his eyes rake over my body. "Sometimes I forget how beautiful you are."

I climb between his spread legs. "Right back at you."

Grabbing the small foil packet between my teeth, I rip it open, and squirt some lube on my cock, clenching my jaw as my hand works it over my length. "Wrap your legs around me," I instruct him.

Theo does as I say, and, using my lube covered fingers, I spread some around his back hole. He groans softly at the touch of my fingers. Propping myself up with one arm, I reach between my legs and grab the base of my cock and notch it at his entrance. Theo places his hands flat on my chest, his thumb stroking along the mountain range tattoo above my heart. He drops his chin, and I slowly push myself inside of him. His jaw drops open and a soft moan spills from his lips.

Since we did zero prep work I make sure I go as slow as possible, but it takes every ounce of my strength not to pound into him.

And despite the burn, Theo must be thinking the same thing because he raises his hips off the bed, pushing me deeper inside of him. "Fuck me, Jackson. Please. Just fuck me."

I slant my mouth over his and push myself the rest of the way inside of him, swallowing every noise he makes. I still my hips for a moment, letting him adjust,

and once I feel his grip on my ass relax slightly, I start to move in and out of him.

With my mouth still on his, the two of us start to move in perfect rhythm. For a moment, I get completely lost in the feel of him around me. The entire sensation still so new, and yet... it feels as if being with him... like this... is as familiar as it gets.

And the thought of being so complete, so at home with another person, is admittedly enough to have my release building at the base of my spine.

I attempt to grab his cock, but he pushes my hand away. “No, don’t need it. Just keep going. Don’t. Stop .”

“Never. I’ll never stop,” I say as I continue to fuck him. I have to grip the comforter on either side of Theo to stop myself from coming, but I continue to let my mouth roam every inch of him that it can reach, playfully and carefully nipping at his skin between each kiss. His ass starts to tighten around me, so I whisper in his ear, “Come for me, Theo.”

Two more hard and fast thrusts and Theo’s calling out my name as his cum spills between us, and not even two seconds later, I still myself deep inside of him, coming so intensely I swear it feels like I black out for a minute.

When I come to, the two of us lay there for a moment, the only sounds filling the apartment are the wood stove roaring in the corner and our heavy breaths.

Suddenly, I hear what sounds like two sixteen-year-old boys arguing outside in the snow.

Theo gently runs a hand through my hair. “As much as I would literally love to do nothing but lay here with you all night, we better get ready. Your mom will be beyond unimpressed if the grooms are late to their rehearsal dinner.”

I rest my chin on his chest and look up at him. “Oh, so now we can talk about my mom?”

He grins deviously. “Eh. We fucked. I got what I needed from you.”

My eyes roll so hard I fear they might get stuck in the back of my head. “You’re such a dick sometimes.”

“Yeah, but you love me.”

Sighing, I hop off the bed and hold my hand out to him. “Yeah, I really do.” He grabs it with a smile, and I pull him off the bed. But when he tries to move to the bathroom, I pull him tight against me, not caring in the slightest that both our stomachs are covered in his release. “You really meant all of that?”

He tilts his head. “All of what?”

“What you said about us moving here? And—and about loving me?”

“Jackson... I’m about to get married in a barn in Montana. If that doesn’t tell you the lengths I’d go to for you I don’t know what does.”

I huff a laugh. “Fair enough.”

Theo gives me one more kiss before saying, “Come on. We have wedding festivities to attend.”

* ? Ends of the Earth - Ty Myers

CHAPTER 46

CHANGE IS GOOD

THEODORE

My mind keeps floating back to last night. Jax said he loves me. I think he has for a while now, but he's been too mad, too scared I'd hurt him again. Too... untrusting. And honestly, I don't blame him. But everything has changed. We've changed. I've changed.

It took a while but Jackson Baker has changed who I am. And I'm all the better for it.

It's only been a few weeks, and sure, it didn't start the way I hoped it would have, but this marriage, our marriage, has brought me a level of peace I didn't even know existed.

I didn't have much to compare it to. None of my relationships in life have been overly serious, and the one I had with Bridget was, well, we don't need to get into that today. But it's safe to say Jax isn't like any of them. He makes my life easier. He makes my life whole. I look forward to coming home to him every day. Every one of his little quirks—yes even the fact that he feels the need to listen to videos on his phone at max volume—make me love him even more.

I think about it all as I stare at myself in the full-length mirror as I button my tan suit pants followed by tucking in my white shirt. I'm in the loft above the barn while Jax is getting ready in his old room inside of the house. Jax protested at the idea of

getting ready separately, stating that we were already married, but all Catherine had to do was give him one look and he folded. He was right... he really can't handle that face.

I do my best to style my hair in the messy and tousled way I know Jax loves before sliding my glasses onto my face. Once I'm satisfied with my appearance, I pick the finishing touch up off the counter. My tie. My mom picked out mine, and Catherine picked out Jackson's. Mine is a burnt-orange color with what looks like small white daisies scattered throughout.

I used to pick the daisies that would bloom around the vineyard in the spring when I was a child. I would bring my mom endless bouquets of them. And she never threw a single one away. There were times where our entire house would smell of nothing but daisies.

For a moment, tears sting my eyes while I finish situating my tie around my neck.

I can't cry. Not yet.

Taking one last look in the mirror, I grab my wallet out of my jeans pocket that is lying across the back of the chair and pull out the handwritten note with my vows on it. Flopping down on the couch, I open the piece of paper I've had folded up in my wallet since the day after I called Jackson's mom to plan all of this—I realize it's no use fighting the tears. Not today.

Clearing my throat, I whisper:

Jax.

I never thought this would be us.

You've given me everything, even when all I gave you was nothing.

You've shown me that it's okay to be me and to chase the things that I want in life. Regardless of what anyone says or does.

I have spent so long living under the weight of everyone else's opinions and expectations, but because of you I know what it means to live a life that's worth living.

You have given me the greatest gift of all. A life filled with hopes and dreams. A life that is unlike anything I could have ever imagined.

We have spent long enough wanting and loving in secret. And from this day forward, I promise to love you loud and with everything I have, now and until the end of time. I don't know what I have done to deserve meeting you, but I will be forever grateful I moved into that little yellow house across the street.

I love you, Jackson Baker.

I'm fully sobbing now. Tears are streaming down my cheeks when I hear my mom's voice. "Theo? Baby, are you in here?"

My voice cracks when I answer her, "Yeah... in here, Mom."

The door opens. "What's wrong?" She's by my side, sitting beside me on the couch before I can even brush away the stray tear that's escaped.

I huff a faint laugh. "I was just reading my vows and got emotional... it's nothing, really." She wraps me up in her arms, and the tears pour out of me again. The dam's burst open, cracked down the middle, and there's no use in fighting it. "I-I don't know what I did to deserve Jax, Mom."

She wipes a hand down the back of my head, as a soft shushing sound falls from her lips. Just like she did when I was little and I would fall and scrape my knee. “You even saying that out loud shows that you do deserve him. I may not know him well, but I do know you. And I see it when you look at him. I see how irrevocably in love you are. He deserves a love like that. And so do you, my boy.”

“I was so awful to him, Mom.”

“That’s in the past now, Theo. You can either drown in your regrets or use them to help you swim toward a better future. If he’s forgiven you, then why can’t you forgive yourself?” I stare at her as the tears begin to slow. “Jackson helped save you from what would have been a loveless marriage. Everything happens for a reason, even if it feels bad at the moment. You have come such a long way, and I am so so proud of you.” Mom wipes the tears from my cheeks, before taking a deep breath, silently instructing me to follow her lead. So I do.

“Thank you, Mom,” I whisper.

“I will always be here for you, Theodore. I will always be here to support what makes you happy.” Leaning over, I kiss her softly on the cheek. She smiles softly. “Now, are you ready to go get yourself married? Again?”

* * *

My dad is on one side and my mom is on the other as we step up to the end of the aisle for what was supposed to be a small ceremony.

I can attest it is anything but small.

All of Billings must be here... but Catherine didn’t stop there.

No, most of the familiar faces from Palm University seem to be here, too, including Austin, Emma, and Lizzie. The entire Campos family is even here... and Coach Taylor.

Jax was right, Catherine really does know everyone.

I fidget nervously as I hear everyone mingling on the other side of the barn doors. And when I say barn I use that term very loosely. It's more like a fabulously rustic event hall that just happens to look like a barn on the outside. I don't know what they usually use this space for, but it sure as hell isn't for cows.

? * The acoustic version of "Sun to Me" sung by MGK begins to play in the barn, and despite the fact that we're already married, I can feel myself break out in a sweat. I just want to see him. And even though I know he's standing just in the hallway to my right, I feel as if we're miles apart. My parents thread their arms through mine, and when my mom softly strokes my forearm with her thumb, I can finally feel my heart rate slow.

"Ready, son?" I look over to my dad who has the proudest smile on his face, and I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, I now feel more ready for my new life than I could have ever hoped.

The doors open and the three of us slowly make our way to the end of the aisle. Mom places a kiss on my cheek, then Dad wraps his other arm around me in a hug that's going to have me sobbing yet again. They find their seats and place their eyes on the entrance as we all wait for Jax.

I see Jax turn the corner and start walking down the aisle towards me, and my breath stills in my chest.

Time stands still.

The world I thought I knew ceases to exist.

And the only thing I can seem to think of is, there is no one else I'd rather have walking down that aisle toward me than Jackson Baker.

* ? Sun to me - mgk

CHAPTER 47

THE MOON he was so nervous.”

I snort a laugh and look over at Dad who just says, “Shut up.”

Suddenly, the music starts playing and I hear the doors to the barn hall open, which means Theo is walking down with his parents. When I hear them close again, the three of us exit the hallway and move to stand right behind them.

I let out a shaky breath as I thread my arm through Mom’s. The doors pull open, and I spot Theo standing at the altar. Dare I say it, he looks beautiful.

My husband.

Absolutely beautiful.

As I walk down the aisle toward him, tears streaming down both of our faces, the only thing I can think of are the vows in my pocket.

Theodore Young,

I’ve always dreamt of having a love like I’ve seen in my parents. A love that has the ability to change the moon and the stars. And then I found you.

I have never met a man that vexes me more than you. A man that has the ability to burrow his way so deeply beneath my skin. A man that, in the most annoying way

possible, can read every single emotion that plays across my face.

And yet, I have also never met a man that pulls me in the way you do. That has consumed me, body and soul, the way you have. That, even when I didn't want to, made me want to love him as fiercely as I do today.

So, because of that, I stand before you today to promise you this. I promise to love you for who you are, for who you want to be, and who you've been. I promise to give you my heart today, and every day that follows. And most importantly, if you ask for it, I promise to change the moon and the stars, for you.

Next thing I know, my hands are threaded with his, and the officiant announces to a room full of people gathered to celebrate our love, "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Jackson Baker and Theodore Young..."

* ? In Your Love - Tyler Childers

JACKSON

“Alright, alright. All of you hush,” Dad grumbles as we all raise our shot glass. Me, Clay, Rocky, Emerson, Bryson, Grayson, Dad, and Mr. Campos are gathered in the kitchen. We’re all dressed and ready to go. All that’s left to do now is... well, get married—again. The twins continue to giggle like a couple of school girls, and Dad pins them with a glare. “Boys, this is your one and only drink for the day so I suggest you listen up.”

In unison, the twins thin their lips and grab their glasses.

? * Dad continues, “I know I usually make some sort of funny toast but today, I wanted to say something a little more from the heart.” Oh shit. He’s going to make me cry. What a dick. “Jackson, my boy, there are no words to describe how proud I am of the man that you are. The last few years have tested who you are as a person in more ways than one, but not once did you let it keep you down.” Here it comes. “To be loved by you is an honor. I know because I am one of the lucky ones.” He looks around the room. “We all are. And my only hope in life, for you, and for your brothers, is to experience a love like that. I’ve found it in you, in Emerson, in the twins, and... in your mother. And now, I can see that you’ve found it in Theo.” Well, fuck. I can feel a small tear trailing down my cheek, and Dad just winks, while Clay claps me on the shoulder. “So don’t squander it. Live every single day, every single moment, with him as if that kind of love is the most precious gift on Earth. Because it is.” Dad’s voice cracks at the end, and every single man in the room suddenly has a sheen to their eyes. Clearing his throat he raises his glass a little higher. “So, here’s to Jackson and Theo. May your love be modern enough to survive the times, but classic enough to last forever.”

“Cheers,” we all say in unison before clinking our glasses together and downing our shots. Well, most of us down them, the twins just sound like they’re going to barf.

Dad sets down his glass and wraps me up in a hug. It’s the kind of hug that only a dad can give. You know the ones where you feel like nothing can touch you... yeah, that kind. And with my face buried in his neck I let a few more tears fall. The two of us pull apart and clap one another on the shoulders. He starts fidgeting with the lapels of my suit jacket while he sniffles. “You best go see your momma out on the deck. She has your tie.”

I’m wearing a dark, navy-blue suit, with a white shirt, brown shoes, and matching belt. I have to admit... I look dapper as fuck. But both of our moms picked out our ties, and she wanted to personally give it to me after I got ready. I nod at Dad. “Alright. Thanks, Dad. See you out there?”

Clay, Emerson, and the twins start something in the background while Rocky and his dad stand by with matching amused, yet somehow stern, expressions on their faces. Dad huffs a laugh. “Let me just get this gang of hooligans ready to go, and we will meet you over by the barn.”

I nod again and turn on my heel to move to the front door but hear Clay say, “Emmy for the thousandth time, I’m his best man. Not you.”

Emerson snaps, “And I’ve told you for the thousandth time to stop calling me that! And I’m his best man you little?—”

Deciding it’s best to nip this in the bud, I yell over my shoulder, not bothering to look at them, because we’ve had this discussion already twice this morning. “Neither of you are my best man. I don’t even have groomsmen. Now shut up and get outside before Dad grounds all of you!”

Not even bothering to hear their rebuttals, I laugh as I open the front door to find Mom standing on the front porch, wrapped up in a tan shawl with a floor length olive-green floral dress underneath. I kiss her on the cheek and say, “You look beautiful, Momma.”

She holds my face in her hand. “You don’t look so bad yourself, baby.” Her eyes glass over for a moment before she hands me my tie. It’s a deep-maroon tie. One I’ve seen in countless pictures.

“Is this Dad’s?”

She nods. “The one from our wedding. I wanted—Well, we wanted you to have it. That day was the start of a beautiful life together, and we wanted a little piece of it with you today.”

Taking her time, she flips up my collar and puts Dad’s tie around my neck. Once it’s just right, she buttons the center button on my jacket. “There. Perfect,” she says softly.

Here they come again.

Placing my hand on my chest, I let my fingers rub against the texture of the wool tie. “Thank you, Momma, for everything.”

She beams. “Thank you for letting me do all of this. It’s the least you could do for not letting me be there to see Elvis.”

I tip my head back in laughter. “Yeah, well you invited half of Montana today, so let’s call it even.”

“I am a little sorry for that.” I look at her deadpan. “Yeah, okay. I’m not.”

“I didn’t expect you to be,” I answer with a wink, just as the front door opens behind me.

“Ready?” Dad holds his arm out, and Mom instinctively threads hers through it. She looks at me for an answer.

Taking a deep breath, I look over at the barn, where I know the music is about to start any second. “Ready.”

* * *

Clay, Emerson, Rocky, and the twins are already sitting down inside as Dad, Mom, and I wait in the entrance hall of the barn. Theo is just on the other side of that door, and I want so badly to just see him, just for a moment, but I don’t want to take away from what I know will be a beautiful moment, so instead, I fidget nervously between my parents.

“He should have had another shot,” Dad mumbles, and Mom reaches behind me and smacks him on the arm.

“No he should not have. You’re lucky I even let you give him one.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dad and I answer in unison.

Mom leans in to whisper in my ear, “It’s okay to be nervous. Your dad threw up right before our wedding; he was so nervous.”

I snort a laugh and look over at Dad who just says, “Shut up.”

Suddenly, the music starts playing and I hear the doors to the barn hall open, which means Theo is walking down with his parents. When I hear them close again, the

three of us exit the hallway and move to stand right behind them.

I let out a shaky breath as I thread my arm through Mom's. The doors pull open, and I spot Theo standing at the altar. Dare I say it, he looks beautiful.

My husband.

Absolutely beautiful.

As I walk down the aisle toward him, tears streaming down both of our faces, the only thing I can think of are the vows in my pocket.

Theodore Young,

I've always dreamt of having a love like I've seen in my parents. A love that has the ability to change the moon and the stars. And then I found you.

I have never met a man that vexes me more than you. A man that has the ability to burrow his way so deeply beneath my skin. A man that, in the most annoying way possible, can read every single emotion that plays across my face.

And yet, I have also never met a man that pulls me in the way you do. That has consumed me, body and soul, the way you have. That, even when I didn't want to, made me want to love him as fiercely as I do today.

So, because of that, I stand before you today to promise you this. I promise to love you for who you are, for who you want to be, and who you've been. I promise to give you my heart today, and every day that follows. And most importantly, if you ask for it, I promise to change the moon and the stars, for you.

Next thing I know, my hands are threaded with his, and the officiant announces to a

room full of people gathered to celebrate our love, “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Jackson Baker and Theodore Young...”

* ? In Your Love - Tyler Childers

EPILOGUE

JACKSON

“Theo, would you stop,” I laugh as he continues to nip along the skin on my neck. He’s got me pressed against the kitchen counter, his arms caging me in. I mean sure, I could move him if I wanted, but I like letting him think he has the upper hand every once and a while. “If we’re late to dinner again our parents might actually kill us.”

“Ugh, fine,” he groans. Turning around he whistles into the house. “Zoe Zoe, come girl.”

Not more than a second later, the heavy stomps of our Zoey girl come barreling down the stairs. She’s a Bernese Mountain Dog and might literally be the love of my life, but I keep that little tidbit to myself.

“Want to go to Grandma’s?” I ask her. Her tail starts moving so fast it resembles something of a helicopter, because well, even though she may be the love of my life, my mom just might be hers.

It’s a bit of a sore subject.

We got Zoey shortly after I graduated and we moved back to Billings. I wanted a good farm dog to be able to accompany me on my days at the ranch, and it’s safe to say she has exceeded all of my expectations. She keeps up with me well when I’m riding Lady, she gets along well with the rest of the dogs on the ranch, and she’s gentle with the animals but firm when she needs to be.

And every night when we go home, she's the best little cuddle bug I could have asked for... even though she literally weighs almost ninety pounds.

As Theo and I walk to the front door, where Zoey is practically jumping out of her skin to get outside, I remember I need to ask Theo about tomorrow. "Hey, what time is the hockey game tomorrow?"

"Starts at seven. You coming?" he asks, slightly surprised.

"I planned on it, yeah. I don't have any more client work I need to do until next week, and Dad's just got me checking fence line tomorrow. So once I'm done with that, I'm all yours."

Theo beams at the prospect of me coming to his game. Admittedly, I haven't been able to much since my business picked up, but I would really like to make more of an effort. He's been killing it, and I'm so proud of him.

Stopping in front of the door, he leans in and kisses my lips softly. "I'd really like that."

"Then consider it a date."

"I'll be sure to save you the best bag of popcorn," he says before winking and opening the door. Zoey takes off like a bolt of lightning across the pasture toward my parents house.

Oh yeah. We live on the ranch.

The second Theo planted the idea of us moving here into Mom's head, she wasted no time putting the wheels in motion. Well, with our permission of course. She's not totally psychotic.

Being a rancher does have its perks because as many people as my mom knows, Dad knows double. And over half those people are skilled tradesmen who would do just about anything for a friend. Since we didn't have to buy the land, building the house was well within our budget. It's just what we need. It's big enough where we can have everyone over for dinners, has an office I can run my security software business from, and most importantly, or so he would say if you asked him, a guest room for when Clay and Rocky come to visit.

Zoey makes it to Mom and Dad's house before we do, but even across the pasture I hear my mom yell "Zoe Zoe" as she barrels through the open front door. Because, yes, Mom leaves the door open so Zoey can come and go whenever she pleases. And by the time we walk in, Zoey is well on her way to making her rounds between Mom, Dad, the twins, and Theo's parents.

Oh yeah... there's that too. The Youngs live in Billings now.

It was a no brainer for them honestly. They took a hard look at their life and business in Virginia, and decided that living across the country from their son wasn't worth some family business. So, they packed up their things, sold the vineyard for a pretty penny, and moved here. However, they decided to live in the city instead of out here. Ronald said he's spent enough of his life working outside, he wanted to enjoy the city life for a while. And that's exactly what they've been doing. In fact, I think the two of them spend more of their time outside of their townhouse than in it.

Everyone truly just seems so... happy .

And as I stand here staring at my family, I can't help but feel a tightness in my chest, because every time I look at them like this, so at home, so comfortable with one another, so together, it hits me so hard that for a moment, I can't believe I actually got here.

I made it.

We made it.

THEO

The hockey team is playing a shutout and, so far, hasn't suffered any new injuries, leaving me with not a lot to do besides watching Jax squirm in the seat directly behind the glass. And because I have nothing to do, and because just having Jax near me is temptation in the most addictive form, I've been texting him almost the entirety of the third period.

Me

If you keep looking at me like that you're going to need to go into my office.

Jax

I'm watching the game thank you very much

Plus, if you would stop looking at me you'd never even know.

Me

I can't not look at you and you know it.

Jax

Click into the last app that was installed on your phone...

What the hell is he talking about?

Looking up, I see Coach is yelling about the lines switching, so I use that time to click into the app. Once it loads it takes a second to register what it is, and then it

dawns on me.

Me

You didn't...

Jax

Oh, I did.

Desperate to test it out, I raise the vibration bar to about halfway. Out of the corner of my eye I watch him nearly jump out of his seat.

I wonder for a second how the hell he got the app on my phone, and then I'm reminded that Jax is nothing less than a genius when it comes to anything tech, and that thought is gone before I can blink.

Smirking deviously, I ask:

Me

I wonder what this other bar does

Jax

Theo...

Me

I think you're going to want to go to my office now.

Jax

Ohhh, I kinda like this funky role-play

Can I call you my professor?

We can get real, freaky nasty

Me

Maybe... now go before I have your knees buckling in front of everyone in here.

He doesn't answer me. He simply gets up and takes a direct line to my office. Anxiously, I wait out the last final minutes of the game, and when the final buzzer goes off, I look over at my assistant. Since there's no injuries that need to be tended to, all he has to do is hand out ice packs we put together before the game. "Hey, I gotta go handle something real quick. You got this?"

"No problem," he replies, and I'm sprinting toward my office.

When I open my door, my eyes immediately go to Jax sitting in the dark, pants around his ankles, in my chair that's now in front of my desk, and his cock in hand. Shutting the door behind me and locking it, I grab my phone back out of my pocket and unlock it. Pulling up the app I crank the power up on the vibration. The yelp that leaves his lips brings me pure joy.

"What do you think you're doing with your cock out in my office? Are you that desperate to come, Jax?"

"Y-yes." His voice cracks with need, and I quickly realize he's closer than I thought he was.

"How bad do you want to come, Jax?"

“S-so bad, Babe... Please,” he begs.

“Oh, we’re already begging, are we?” And with that I’m hitting my knees in front of him, sucking him into my mouth.

Jax lifts his hips off the seat and hisses, “ Fuck, Theo.”

Pulling off his dick, I turn the toy all the way up and give him the permission he’s so desperately looking for. “Come for me, Jackson.”

And he does.

I swallow down his release before sitting back on my heels to appreciate him as I lick my lips in satisfaction.

With the toy off and the aftershocks of his release diminishing, he rests his head back against the chair. I follow his eyes to the ceiling to find a little green dot blinking in the vent in the corner. “I will never get enough of you, Theo... And on the long days you spend here in this office, just know, I’ll be watching.”

I should’ve known he would’ve put up cameras in this office. And why that sends a thrill through my body, I’ll never know.

But one thing I do know, is that when I look back at my sweet, loving husband, it’s impossible not to smile from ear to ear, even when he is being quite the little stalker.

I don’t mind though because there’s not a thing I would change about him.

My husband.

My Jackson.