



Tight End (Red Zone #4)

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Category: Sport

Description: Faking a relationship with him was supposed to fix everything. Falling for him might break me.

Brixton

My life has always been about pushing limits, but this time, I pushed too far. So when a PR nightmare threatens my band's reputation, the perfect solution is standing right in front of me—Sam Hartley, the NFL's golden boy and star tight end who has no patience for my brand of chaos. He's clean-cut, radiates perfection, and follows every rule.

We agree to fake a relationship for the cameras, convincing the world we're madly in love while we can't stand each other behind closed doors. The rules are simple: no strings, no emotions, and definitely no falling for each other.

The problem?

Sam isn't just a game I can win; he's a challenge that makes me question every line I've drawn. Each fake smile and staged touch feels like a battle, but behind the cameras, the tension between us is raw and real. As time passes, the act starts to crack, and the line between hate and desire blurs.

But when our lies become truth, I know letting him in could be my biggest risk yet.

Will playing pretend cost me the only real thing I've ever wanted?

Sam

Being a star athlete comes with rules, and I've spent my career following them. Brixton Scott? He breaks every single one. So when our PR teams propose a fake relationship for the sake of both our images, I should have said no. He's reckless, unpredictable, and seems to enjoy making my life difficult.

Now we're both stuck in this arrangement, forced to convince everyone we're the real deal. But off-camera, every exchange feels like a battle I'm determined not to lose and every second with him tests my patience—and my rules. It's messy, it's complicated, and it's

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Chapter 1

Brixton

TWO YEARS EARLIER

I stare out at the screaming crowd, sweat drizzling down the sides of my face. My t-shirt sticks to me like Saran-Wrap, heart thrashing in my chest.

We just rocked the Sun Arena in Oakland and it was more incredible than anything I've ever imagined.

This is my fucking life.

And it's only the beginning.

Since Sin City was signed by SoCal Records, one of the biggest labels in the country, we've exploded and been swept up in a whirlwind of concert dates, tour announcements, interviews, and launch parties ever since.

"You guys were so incredible tonight!" My future sister-in-law Allie squeals when she bursts into the VIP suite backstage. She throws her arms around me. "You absolutely lit up that stage, Brix."

"Thanks, Al. I really appreciate you guys coming for the show, especially when you're ready to pop. Jesus, I can barely get my arms around you anymore," I joke .

Her majorly pregnant belly keeps me from hugging her too tight. I grin at my older brother, Davis, who stands behind her.

“You know we’d have never miss being here for you.” Davis claps me on the shoulder, his dark eyes crinkling in the corners. “Besides, this is a pretty big step up from all the crappy places where you guys used to play.”

And Davis never missed a single one of our gigs before he took a job with a law firm in San Francisco a few months ago. He was always there for me.

The only one who was.

So it really shouldn’t have come as a shock that my dad declined my invite to the show tonight. But it still hurts.

“Dad couldn’t make it?” he asks.

I shake my head. He didn’t even bother to make up an excuse.

The ever-present reality stabs at my heart.

I killed his wife.

And even after all of these years, he never lets me forget it.

Nor does he care that I lost her, too. Never even got to meet her.

But I force a smile for Davis, refusing to let the giant ass elephant in the room get under my skin. If Dad doesn’t care enough to be here, then I sure as hell don’t give a good goddamn to acknowledge that he’s missing.

Tonight is the best night of my life, what I've worked my ass off for, and nobody is going to take that away from me. Nobody is going to rain on this parade, least of all my fucking prick of a father.

Champagne corks pop, bubbly liquid flows over the tops of the bottles and spills onto the plush carpet around us as my bandmates approach. Lane Maxwell, the drummer and my closest friend in the band, slings an arm around my shoulders and takes a long gulp of the champagne .

"We're fucking solid gold right now, thanks to this guy." Lane nods at Davis and holds up the bottle with a wink. "Our lawyer made sure of that."

Allie lets out a yelp and bounces against my other side, clapping her hands. "I'm so excited for you guys. This is so surreal. Remember all those nights when we followed you around to those dingy ass bars in Hollywood?"

Dak Prescott clinks his highball glass of whiskey against Lane's bottle. "To us. Tonight and fucking always."

"Sin City!" we all roar in unison. More cheers erupt from the rest of the people crammed into the suite. It's a total zoo in the best way. So many friends and family members traveled from a handful of different states to see us debut as the headliner for the biggest show we've ever played to date.

At least they all give a shit that we're about to take off like a rocket.

Aiden Taylor, our guitarist, hands me a bottle of champagne and I guzzle it down. The bubbles shoot up the back of my throat and flood my nasal passages. I've never felt more alive than when I'm performing on stage and tonight, the high was the most intense it's ever been. The screams, the lights, the pulsating music. Fuck, it was magic.

And everyone in that audience felt it, too.

Dak and Aiden grab hold of my brother and pull him over to them, no doubt to talk his ear off about the recording contract we recently signed.

Allie nudges me hard when she sees a bleached blonde girl sidle up to Lane and press herself against him. “What a freaking viper. I didn’t think they let groupies back here. Isn’t this supposed to be a private room?”

I glance at her over my shoulder and grin down at Allie. “With tits like that, you can get access to pretty much anywhere. ”

She lets out a sharp peal of laughter. “I didn’t think you paid attention to big boobies, B.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m gay, not blind. And yeah, they’re damn impressive. Good for him.”

Allie shakes her head. “He can totally do better.”

“Yeah, but right about now, I don’t think he wants better. I think he just wants a sure thing.”

“You’re gross.”

I shrug. “He’s got a lot to celebrate tonight. He deserves it.”

“And what about you? Who will you be celebrating with tonight?” She scans the room and not so inconspicuously points to a tall, dark-haired guy standing in a far corner. I shift and bring a hand to the back of my neck, holding his gaze for a second too long.

“You know I don’t like the PDA shit.”

“Yeah, but he’s hot. And definitely into you by the looks of it.”

The truth is, the other guys can fuck around without anyone raising eyebrows. I’m openly gay, but that doesn’t mean people want it thrown in their faces. So I try to be discreet about my hookups. It was especially hard before we signed with SoCal. I never liked to broadcast my sexuality because I’m the front man. And a gay front man is a hard sell, no matter how talented he is.

Fortunately, the public spoke, and after opening for a bunch of bands in sold-out clubs around LA, SoCal came calling and Davis cinched the deal for us.

I almost feel like I can be free.

Almost.

But something still holds me back.

As anyone in this industry knows, luck can be very fucking fleeting.

So I keep my private life private .

“I’m good. I’ve got you.” I put an arm around her shoulders and hug her close to my side. “This is really the only way I can hug you these days.”

“Are you actually making a crack about my weight? You know I’m pregnant and my emotions are fragile right now.”

I chuckle. “So sensitive.”

“You know, you’re lucky I?—”

She cries out and stumbles backward. Her hand reaches for me, clutching my jacket for balance.

Davis rushes back to us, his eyes wide with alarm. “What’s wrong?”

I snake an arm around her waist. “Al, what happened? Are you okay?”

Her face pales, all color draining from her cheeks. “I—I—” Then her eyes drop down to the pants she’s wearing. A large wet spot spreads across the fabric. “I think my water just broke.”

I look at Davis. “Shit. Is that bad? She’s not due yet. What does she need?”

Allie clings to Davis. “It’s too soon. I’m only thirty-seven weeks. She’s not supposed to be here now. Oh my God, Dr. Micelli isn’t here. I can’t do this. It’s too early.”

“We need to get to a hospital.” Davis smiles and strokes the side of her face. “You can do this. Everything is going to be perfect. I’m right here, and I promise I won’t leave your side.”

He’s always the voice of reason, always the guy you want around in a crisis because he never sweats anything. Even now, with his kid about to be born three weeks early, the guy looks cool as a cucumber.

For as long as I can remember, he was always the rock. Dad would stow himself away in his office with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s whenever shit went sideways and Davis would pick up the pieces .

So I’d totally expect him to grab this situation by the balls. He’s going to be an

amazing dad. His kid is lucky to have him.

Kid. Holy fuck.

She really is coming tonight.

I grab my phone and pull up the Uber app, swiping to find a car and a nearby hospital. "I just got an UberX. It'll be downstairs in five minutes."

"Clear the path! Lady's having a baby!"

Lane lets out a whoop and I high five him on the way out. "You're gonna be an uncle. Uncle fucking Rock Star."

My heart pounds as we make our way to the side entrance of the theatre. A couple of my security guys tail us to make sure we get to the car without being accosted by fans.

Allie yells and moans and screams every few minutes and my chest tightens every time. "Shit, man, that doesn't sound good," I mutter to Davis.

"She's in labor," he says calmly. "She's having contractions."

"I feel like my uterus is being sliced into with a goddamn samurai sword," Allie howls, clutching her midsection.

We finally make it outside and hustle over to the Ford Expedition parked at the curb. Davis opens the back door and helps Allie into the backseat before sliding in after her. I run around to the other side and pull open the door before jumping into the truck. Davis stabs his phone screen, and after a few seconds, he lets out a frustrated sigh.

“Was that the doctor?” Allie wheezes, holding her belly.

Davis nods. “Voicemail.

“Oh my God, what are we going to do? He has my birthing plan. We need him!”

The driver glances at us over his shoulder. “She isn’t gonna have that baby in my backseat, is she?”

“Just watch the road and drive the fucking car,” I say .

Davis rubs her back, whispering in her ear, and I clutch her hand.

“Squeeze it if shit starts to hurt again.”

I barely get the words out before her hand becomes a goddamn vise. “Jesus Christ,” I yell. “Good fucking thing I’m done playing for the night. But I need that hand for our next show, so be gentle.”

Her head whips around, her blue eyes slanting me a glare. “Fuck you, Brix,” she says through gritted teeth.

Then she turns to Davis. “I’m so scared.”

The driver looks back again just as the traffic light in front of us goes from yellow to red.

“Red light,” I growl at him.

He whips his head around and slams on his brakes, skidding to the middle of the intersection. Blinding headlights flash in my periphery. I turn my head, my mouth

opening to let out a yell that never gets a chance to hit the air before the car plows into us.

The skull-shattering sound of metal crushing against metal assaults my ears, my stomach roiling at the noxious smells of smoke and searing rubber. I rub the side of my head where it slammed against the window. Everything aches.

“Davis,” Allie cries. “Wake up. Please.”

With one hand on my head, I slowly turn toward her and Davis, a sharp pain shooting down the base of my neck.

But it’s nothing compared to the one in my heart when I see my brother.

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Chapter 2

Brixton

I grip Allie's hand tight. "You can do this. You're so fucking strong. She's gonna be here so soon."

Allie screams, tears streaming down her face, remnants of eye makeup streaking her cheeks. "I can't do this without him."

My own tears lodge in the back of my throat, choking me slowly and tormentingly. "You can. I'm here for you. We're gonna get through this."

When we got to the hospital, I went to the Emergency Room with Davis while the EMTs took Allie straight up to Labor and Delivery.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. The memory of my brother's bloody body crushed by the metal door will haunt me forever. That sonofabitch Uber driver. I wanted to tear him apart with my bare hands for taking his goddamn eyes off the road like he did. All because he was so worried about Allie giving birth in the back of his damn car.

Davis was in really bad shape. After finally getting him out of the car and into the ambulance, he crashed in the back of the ambulance. When we got to the Emergency Room and he was stable, the doctors did a CT scan and detected trauma to his liver and kidney. They took him right into an operating room because he was bleeding internally.

I'd like to think positively, that no news is good news. But no news is just fucking no news.

"Okay, Allie," the doctor says. "She's crowning. I need you to give me one more good push when I say."

"I can't do it," Allie wails. "It hurts too much. Fuck!"

My chest tightens. Goddammit, this isn't fair. Davis should be here right now, holding his fiancée's hand while they welcome their baby into the world. I shouldn't be here. It should be me lying on that fucking operating table.

"Push," the doctor yells. "Now."

Her screams pierce the tense air and then, seconds later, a tiny screech rings out.

She's here. And her dad isn't.

The doctor sits back and smiles when the baby cries out again, this time even louder than the first time. "She's got a good set of pipes, that's for sure."

Allie sobs. "Just like her Uncle Rock Star."

I hug her and she clings to me, her whole body quaking with grief.

"Do you want to meet your daughter?" One of the nurses walks over to Allie and holds out a freshly cleaned baby wrapped in a blue and pink striped blanket.

"She's beautiful," I whisper.

"I know. Davis needs to see her." She looks up at me. "Has anyone called or texted

you? Is he out of surgery?"

I shake my head. I've only checked my phone about a million times since I rushed to Labor and Delivery and I haven't heard dick from them.

As Allie cuddles the baby a while later, I pace back and forth in front of the hospital bed, fisting the sides of my hair. "When the fuck are they gonna tell us something? It's been hours."

"Just go to him. I'll be fine." She struggles to smile at me. "But you'd better call me as soon as you hear anything."

I drop a kiss on the top of her head and smile at my niece before taking a quick picture of them both with my phone. "What are you gonna call her?"

"We hadn't decided for sure." Allie's voice cracks again. "I don't want to decide by myself. I can't."

I nod. "Got it. So Gorgeous Girl it is until Dad's out of surgery."

My heart clenches with those words.

He has to be okay. He needs to meet his daughter, to be the amazing dad he was meant to be.

I sweep a hand through my hair, ignoring the chill that slips down my spine. Something doesn't feel right, and an urgency to get back to my brother grips me. "I'll be back."

With my phone in my hand, I run back to the Emergency wing, stopping short at the nurses' station. A few heads turn my way, recognition in their eyes like a clanging

alarm bell between my temples because the last thing I want is to talk to anyone but the people who have control over my brother's life right now.

"You guys never called. I want a status on Davis Scott."

The nurses exchange a look and one of them comes out from behind the desk. "He's in recovery right now. We were about to call you."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "Thank God."

"There was a fair amount of damage, but the doctors worked quickly and were able to stop the bleeding. He should be waking up soon." She flashes a shy smile. "He'll be in good shape for your next concert."

"Yeah. Great."

I don't mean to be a dick, and I definitely don't miss the sting of rejection that flashes across her face, but I'm not in the mood to acknowledge anything beyond my brother's prognosis at this moment.

Following the nurse to recovery, I shoot off a quick text to Allie, letting her know Davis is all good.

I've never felt so relieved in my life. Davis is my best friend, and the only one who remotely came close to being a father to me, even though my real one was never too far away physically. But mentally and emotionally? He might as well have been on another planet.

The nurse pushes open the curtain and my heart jumps into my throat when I see my brother's pale face against the stark white bedsheets.

Jesus. A wave of fear rushes over me.

He looks...

No, I can't even think the fucking word.

And then, as if he senses my panic, his eyes open a crack. I push past the nurse and run over to the bed.

"How do you feel?"

"Forget me. I need to know about Allie and the baby."

I pull out my phone to show him the picture I took.

His eyes well up. "My girls. They're beautiful."

"Yeah, well, you need to hurry up and get better so you can pick out a name for the baby. Allie won't do it alone." I grin. "I'm going with Gorgeous Girl until you decide."

Davis smiles weakly and shifts on the bed.

The nurse busies herself taking his vitals and checking the IV levels. "Be careful not to move too much, sweetie. You don't want to tear the stitches, and you're still too numb right now to feel much. "

"Hey," Davis croaks, nodding his head at me. "My baby bro here is a rock star. Did you know that?"

She winks at me. "He's all the nurses can talk about right now."

Exactly my point about why an openly gay front man just doesn't sell as well.

My phone vibrates. I click to accept the call from Allie and hold it up to Davis's face so he can see his daughter for the first time.

There are a lot of tears and sob-choked words exchanged, but the light that brightens up Davis's face when he sees his baby girl live for the first time...shit, I'll never forget it.

"What should we name her?" Allie asks with a snuffle.

"You love Julianna. Let's go with that."

I sneak a look at Allie's face. She smiles. "Okay. Julianna it is."

"I still like Gorgeous Girl," I pipe in.

After a few more minutes of cooing at Julianna, Davis settles back on his pillow. "I'll see you both really soon," he says, his voice strained. "I...love you."

Then he clicks to end the call and hands me my phone.

A flicker of pain darkens his face, erasing the light I'd seen the whole time he was on the phone. I swallow hard. "D, what's wrong? I thought you were numb?"

He lets out a tired laugh. "The incision site is numb, but the rest of me feels like it was run over by a Mack truck. Don't worry. They said I'm good. Now, go. Take care of my girls. They need you more than I do."

Davis drops his hand on top of mine. "And call Dad. Let him know about Julianna. Send him the picture."

A chill slips down my spine. “You’re sure you want me to go?”

Davis nods. “You’ve got things to do while I recover down here. And you’d better make sure you give Julianna music lessons and singing lessons so she can be a big star one day, just like her Uncle Rock Star.”

“You’ll be there to hold me to it,” I say, my voice cracking. Panic wrenches my gut as I stare at my brother.

His face relaxes into a real smile, for the first time since he’s been here, and my shoulders relax as spots of color creep back into his cheeks. I let out a shaky breath.

“Stop looking at me like I’m dying. I told you, I’m fine. So get back to the girls. Give my baby Jules kisses for me.”

“Okay,” I say after a long pause. “The nurses have my number in case of anything. Just make sure they call if you need anything. I’ll be back in a little while...as long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

He says the words but they don’t unravel the knot in my chest. I stand there, shifting my weight between my feet, scouring the bleeping machines as if they’ll give me a clear sign to either stay or go.

The nurse returns and checks on Davis’s vitals again. “Things are stable, which is good. But you need to rest.” With a pointed look at me, I throw my hands in the air.

I guess that’s my sign.

“I’m leaving, don’t worry. Just call me if anything changes.”

“It won’t,” Davis says. “Take care of Allie. Maybe find her some kind of Hostess cake in the cafeteria. She loves that poisonous crap. Lived on Hostess for the past eight months.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” I give his hand a squeeze. “See you later.”

“See you,” he echoes.

I walk out of the room, the events of the night finally catching up to me and wallpapering my brain. So much excitement and anticipation followed by even more terror and angst. Raking a hand through my hair, I pass by the chapel on my way to the elevators.

I’ve never been overly religious. Not really even remotely religious, if I’m being honest. But something makes me push open the wooden door and step inside of the darkened space. The strong scent of incense is heavy in the air. It clogs my throat to the point where I can barely breathe through it.

Stepping inside, my eyes adjust to the dim gold and orange light. Rows of candles glow along the sides of the chapel and a large crucifix hangs on the wall opposite me. I swallow hard, clenching and unclenching my fingers. I wipe my sweaty palms on the front of my jeans and look around at the empty pews in front of me.

Do I sit down? Light a candle? Kneel at the altar?

I have no idea what to do but somehow, just being here makes me feel like I’m doing something to help my brother.

“If you don’t know what to do, just light a candle and say a prayer.”

I jump and twist around toward the intruding voice. A dark figure hunches over the

top of the pew with his hands folded. His head rests on top of them, a spill of dark hair falling over his eyes that stare straight in front of him. Squinting in the darkness, a flicker of recognition registers in my brain.

Sam Hartley. Tight end for the Oakland Saints. Hot as fuck and built like a brick shithouse.

Crap, am I allowed to think those things in the presence of God? I mean, let's face it, God created him so he knows it's all true. He can't hold it against me.

"Thanks." I guess I give off amateur religious vibes. Taking a few slow steps toward one of the rows of candles, I cast another glance at Sam. His broad, muscular upper body is stiff, jaw tight and tensed.

I fish out a match and hold it to one of the flickering flames, igniting the tip. Then I choose a candle in the top row and hold it to the wick until it flares. I blow out the match and stick it with the other extinguished ones.

Say a prayer.

I watch the candle burn for a few long seconds, waiting for some sense of peace to wash over me. Isn't that what's supposed to happen? Some feeling that everything is going to be okay because God's on your side?

"If you're waiting for some magic to happen, it won't."

That voice again.

But damn, it's like he can read my mind. I've heard him speak in interviews and he sounds like a pretty smart and well-educated guy. But maybe he's got psychic powers besides all the superpowers he displays on the football field.

Still, my spine tenses. I turn around and look at him.

“I appreciate the chapel tutoring session, but I’m good.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “If you were good, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Maybe I’m just thankful.” My pulse throbs against the side of my throat because his words hit me with the force of a hammer to my chest.

“Or maybe you’re just covering your bases.” He rises from the kneeler and sits back in the pew. With a sweep of his hand, he pushes the hair out of his eyes, slicking it back to expose the tormented expression on his face. “But either way, it won’t matter. No matter how many prayers you say, candles you light, or good karma you command, none of it will change God’s plan.” He hangs his head. “And it really fucking sucks.”

“I, ah, didn’t think we were allowed to curse in here.”

Sam lifts his tortured gaze to mine. “I don’t think it can make things any worse at this point.”

“I was in a bad car accident tonight while we were trying to get my brother’s fiancée to the hospital. She went into labor after a concert. My brother was hurt pretty badly and needed surgery. But he’s out now and things are looking good. Plus, he’s got a brand-new baby girl to meet.”

I step into a pew a few rows in front of him and sink onto the bench. “I came here after leaving his room just to say thanks, I guess.”

Sam narrows his eyes at me. “You’re Brixton Scott, right? Sin City? I’ve seen you guys play in LA.”

I nod. “Yeah. We were at the Sun Arena. Fucking Uber driver was more concerned about Allie giving birth in his backseat than getting us to the hospital in one piece.”

A hint of a smile lifts Sam’s lips. “You just cursed.”

“You said it was okay.” I shrug. “And you seem to be more of an expert than me with this stuff, so...”

“I said it wouldn’t make things any worse,” he corrects. A deep sigh shudders his shoulders and he reclines against the back of the pew.

“Why are you here?”

“My brother. He’s been sick for a long time. It’s bad. He’s terminal. And I’ve spent more time in this chapel than you can imagine over the past couple of years.” He stares down at his hands. “We thought things would get better, but he’s just gotten weaker and weaker. This afternoon, he took a nosedive. The doctors told us it’s the end.”

“That explains why the media was all over you after this afternoon’s game.” He slowly lifts his head and stares at me. “Yeah, I know who you are, too.”

He holds my curious gaze. “Today wasn’t one of my shining moments, that’s for sure. My head wasn’t in it at all. I’d just gotten the call right before kickoff, and the game pretty much ended before it started for me.”

“So why’d you come here, then? Praying for a miracle?”

With a look around, his face hardens. “Nah. Not anymore. Now I’m just praying that he’s not in any more pain. That he can go peacefully. That my family and I can figure out how to pick up the pieces when he’s gone.” Sam’s Adam’s apple bobs in his

throat and I have the sudden urge to wrap my arms around him.

He's such a huge force in the NFL. A star rookie turned league superstar after only a few short years. But he sits here in front of me now, powerful, strong, and completely broken at the same time.

My heart clenches.

It could be me saying those very same things if the situation was different and if Davis hadn't come out of the surgery successfully.

"I'm really sorry about your brother." I finally find the words and he smiles.

"Thanks. I'm glad your brother is going to be okay." He stretches his arms over his head, the arms of his suit jacket hugging the muscles. I swallow hard and drag my eyes away from him.

Suddenly, I feel like I'm intruding on his space. I rise from the pew and back away, part of me resisting the movement because in all honesty, I want to stay. He gazes at me, sadness and resignation pooling in his dark eyes.

My fingers itch to trace over the lines of his jaw, my lips tingle with the urge to taste his.

Seriously?

I ball my fingers into a fist.

Jesus, I need to get out of here. I can't have these thoughts...in here, of all places...about a guy who's about to lose his brother to some horrible disease.

Our eyes lock.

My brain short-circuits and I struggle to find parting words, mainly because I don't want to part.

"Um, good luck with...uh, the rest of the season."

The guy needs to grieve alone. He doesn't want me in there interrupting his spiritual flow.

Sam watches me as I practically trip over my feet to get through the door. I can feel the heat of his stare singe my skin through all the layers of clothing. My breath hitches when the door closes. I stand in the hallway, the stark white walls suddenly cold and void of compassion.

With a thumping heart, I grab my buzzing phone from my pocket.

Mercy Hospital flashes across the screen. I stab the Accept button.

"Hello?"

Blood rushes between my ears, flowing so forcefully, I almost can't hear a response.

"Mr. Scott," a female voice says in a no-nonsense tone. "We need you to come to Recovery on the second floor as soon as possible."

I don't say a word. I just run to the elevator. The doors open and I dart down the hallway, searching for signs pointing to Recovery.

"Mr. Scott!"

I stop short and whirl around, coming face to face with the nurse who'd been in here before. A tall man in a white coat next to her walks toward me.

“Mr. Scott, there was a complication with your brother's surgery.”

My mind swims with frenzied thoughts, terror snaking through my insides as snippets of words pierce my heart.

No...no...no.

White noise consumes the space around me and I can hear his voice through the muffled cloud.

“...shard of glass...punctured an artery...couldn't stop the bleeding...”

Breaths come in short and sharp gasps, slicing at my throat.

“Take care of my girls. They need you right now.”

Fuck. He knew something wasn't right.

He made me leave because he needed to make sure Allie and the baby were protected, that I'd be with them when they heard the news.

When Davis said goodbye, he meant it.

And now he's gone forever.

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Chapter 3

Sam

I don't know how much longer I sit in the chapel after Brixton leaves. Feels like I've been in here for hours...days...years, even. But for as much time as I've spent in here, it hasn't done a damn thing to help my brother Chase.

Memories pop between my ears like cracking bullets.

My mind trips back to the day on the football field when I was visiting him at Michigan State. It was just a scrimmage, first of the season. The sun beat down on me as I watched my brother launch his arm back to make a pass. Three guys on the opposing team barreled into him when he tried to stand up, and he crumpled to the ground.

With a throbbing heart, I can still feel the panic flooding my veins, watching him lie motionless on the field. Seconds dragged into minutes. I rose on legs that were wobbly as limp spaghetti noodles as the medical team worked on him.

He'd always been so healthy and strong. One of the best players in the college circuit. How the fuck did his heart just give out without warning ?

I ball my hands into fists and slam them on the top of the pew.

Turns out that arrhythmogenic cardiomyopathy, a deadly coronary artery disease, is underdiagnosed and can occur pretty suddenly. He'd had coronary bypass surgery to

restore blood flow to the heart but was told his football career was over because the condition raises the likelihood of cardiac arrest and sudden death.

Boom. Just like that. Everything he'd worked for was yanked out from under him.

But he was alive. That was all that mattered. He never let it get him down. He just changed gears and created a new path for himself. Said he wanted to be a pediatric cardiologist so that he could help detect heart disease early in kids so that lives weren't lost so senselessly. He'd been one of the lucky ones because he was saved. So many times, that's not the case. He wanted to make a positive change.

He's been working so hard for the past six years to do it.

And according to the team of specialists working on him, he's not going to make it to the finish line. His heart has gotten too weak despite the best treatments, and he's now in the end stages of heart failure.

My big brother, the star quarterback, is now lying on his death bed because, short of a miracle and a donor heart, he won't survive to see the end of the month, much less his residency here in Oakland.

Tears sting my eyes and I drop my head onto my clenched fists.

It's not fucking fair. Chase doesn't deserve this. He's touched so many lives and has the ability to impact so many more. How the hell can we really be here right now, saying goodbye to such a bright and shining star?

"How the fuck can you just snuff out that light?" I growl into the silence. "How can you take him away from us like this?"

I slouch back against the pew, half-expecting to explode into flames for challenging

God's bullshit plan in his space.

I don't.

I'm just consumed by the impending doom of what comes next.

Maybe that's my punishment.

I rise to my feet and scrub a hand down the front of my face. Sometimes I think I'm a coward for coming down here. Yeah, I say I'm here to plead my case with God, but if I'm being honest, I'm also hiding from the devastation that's damn close to crushing our family.

I can't run from it anymore. It'll eventually find me and suck me in.

With a heaviness in my gut, I pull open the chapel door and trudge to the VIP floor. Since this is the hospital Chase is working his residency in, they've given him top notch accommodations to make sure he's comfortable while they scramble for a heart that might not come in time.

When I arrive at his room, I stand in the open doorway, staring at my family.

Mom and Dad sit on either side of Chase's bed. They each hold one of his pale hands. Mom's rosary is clutched in her free one. The room is blanketed in a soft glow from the overhead light. No other lamps are on. Tension is thick in the air, Mom's quiet sobs making my chest ache.

One of the nurses approaches. Her name is Rayleigh but everyone calls her Rae. I turn to look at her. She's pretty, and usually really perky. Quick with a bright smile and sparkly blue eyes. But tonight, her eyebrows are knitted together, lips are twisted into a frown, and her normally laughing gaze is dulled by sadness .

I take a few steps backward into the hallway. “This is the end, isn’t it.” I pose it as a statement instead of a question.

Rae’s shoulders hunch over. “His sats have been dropping. We’re medicating him, but the damage is too extensive.”

I turn back to my brother. “He needs a heart.”

“We’re trying so hard to find one.” Her voice cracks and she wrings her hands together. I know Chase has had a thing for Rae ever since he started here as an intern, and I’ve noticed how attentive she is with him, especially when she thinks nobody is watching. “I’m still hoping we can find one before it’s too late.”

Too late.

Feels like we might be there already.

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. Chase’s eyes float open and he slowly moves his head toward me and Rae.

“Hey, stalker.” His voice is weak but he still manages a smile.

I step into the room, leaving Rae in the hallway. Mom looks up, startled. I drop a kiss on the top of her head and she struggles to stand up. Dad walks around the side of the bed and puts his arm around her. They both look at me, their tired eyes and haggard faces making my heart ache.

“Go get some air.” I nod toward my brother. “Let me stay with him for a while.”

Rae follows my parents down the hallway after flashing a final sad smile at Chase.

“She’s really into you,” I say, sinking into the chair where my mother sat hunched over the bed a few seconds earlier.

“Yeah...” His eyes stay on the empty doorway for a long second. “In another life, we could have really been something.”

“I hate hearing you talk like that.”

“Gotta be realistic, baby bro. We’ve been hanging on for a long time, hoping and praying for a miracle. But it’s just not in the cards for me. I’ve done as much good as I can and I’m glad for every day I woke up and was able to help people who might not have made it through otherwise.”

“You gave so much,” I say, my jaw tight. “It’s not fucking fair.”

“Maybe that was my purpose. My wake-up call.” He shrugs and sighs.

It pains me to look at him. He’s such a different version of the guy he used to be, like a before and after of Steve Rogers taking the superpower serum in Captain America .

He turns his gaze up at me. “I’ve accepted it and you need to as well.”

I grit my teeth. “I can’t. I won’t.”

“There isn’t anything you can do to stop it. It was a freak thing that went undetected and the after effects...” He shakes his head. “My heart’s a lemon. What can you do?”

“I’m not giving up. You’ve got more to do.”

Chase points at one of the machines next to him. “Those readings beg to differ. Now let’s talk about something we can fix, like your game. What the heck happened to you

on that field today? You're not allowed to have a bad day. You've worked too hard. When you're out there, you need to think about the game and nothing else, understand? That's what's in your control."

"You've always been so goddamn matter-of-fact and logical about shit." I roll my eyes.

"Yes, well, it's kind of necessary when you're a doctor." He winks at me. "I can't get lost in my emotions, and neither should you. Do your job, Sammy. Be the star I know you are."

I recline in my chair and rake a hand through my hair. "Speaking of stars, I ran into one a little while ago in the chapel. Brixton Scott. "

Chase's eyes pop open wide, wider than I've seen in a long time. "The lead singer of Sin City? No shit!"

"No shit."

I can't shrug the guilt that eats at me, though. For as attracted as I am to the rock star, vicious and fierce jealousy plagues my mind and soul. Brixton's brother gets to live while my brother...

Fuck. I still can't even think it.

"I love that band. I remember going to see them before they got big. Those were great nights," he muses.

"They were..." My voice drifts off and suddenly I'm back in the chapel, tormented by toxic thoughts and choked with desire for a man I'm not even a hundred percent sure is gay.

Chase's eyes narrow. "What are you not saying?"

I blink fast. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on. You think I missed the fact that you were a total groupie for Sin City back in the day? You always knew where they'd be, and if we were in driving distance, it was a done deal that we'd be going to that club." He smirks. "You've got a thing for Brixton Scott. You always did."

"You're delusional," I scoff, turning away because I can feel the heat creeping up the sides of my neck. "And why the hell are we having this conversation anyway? We should be talking about you."

"I'm sick of talking about me. There's nothing left to talk about. We've gone over everything a million times, and..."

He stops and my spine stiffens.

"What?"

Chase pulls his eyes away from me. "I signed a DNR."

The words hit me like a cinderblock to the chest. "What the fuck are you talking about? You're on the list for a heart. You really want to give up?"

"The odds aren't great." He sinks deeper into the white pillows. "And I don't want to be kept alive with machines, waiting for something that might never come."

"You can't just give up," I rasp.

"I've accepted what I can't change," he whispers. "And you need to do the same. Be

there for Mom and Dad. Take care of them.”

“Stop talking like you’re dying,” I growl, pushing back the chair and shooting out of it.

Chase looks at me, his eyes filled with resignation. “But I am, Sammy. And I’m finally okay with it. You know why? Because you’re here. You’ve always been the best brother, my biggest cheerleader. And you’ll be the glue that holds everyone together when I’m gone.”

I fist the sides of my head and stomp toward the window. Staring out at the city of Oakland, thousands of twinkling lights blink back at me. My pulse throbs against the side of my throat, a knot of tears lodging in my throat. A tingling sensation assaults my nose and I stare at the ceiling to keep my eyes from watering.

“This world needs you, Chase,” I finally say, turning around just as I hear a knock on the doorframe.

Rae stands there, spots of pink coloring her cheeks, her lips curled into one of the smiles she usually has reserved for Chase.

“It does. And God must agree because...” She steps into the room, her eyes shining with tears. “I just got a call. We have a heart.”

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Chapter 4

Brixton

PRESENT DAY

My back stiffens as I slowly step out of the truck I rented for while I'm in Oakland.

What the fuck is he doing here?

With one fist clenched tight and the other clutching a bunch of brightly colored shopping bags, I stalk up the few stairs to the front door of Allie's house in Golden Gate Heights and give it a hard knock. I twist my head to glare at the offending car parked in the short driveway.

I guess I shouldn't be shocked. It's the baby's birthday.

Allie opens the door in a frenzy, her blonde hair tied up in a messy ponytail. Her cheeks flush a deep pink when she looks at me. Her shoulders lift in a tiny shrug. "There wasn't anything I could do," she mouths.

Squaring my shoulders, I enter the small foyer. I won't let him into my head this time. I refuse to let him add to all the guilt that festers and feasts on me daily.

If he and Allie had been home instead of at the arena, they'd have been safe and protected. They would have gone to their hospital and seen their doctor when Allie's water broke instead of shuttling to a completely foreign one in Oakland with an Uber

driver who fucking walked away from the accident he caused without a scratch.

I know some of that is illogical and unreasonable, but I can't help the way I feel.

And I feel responsible even though I know I wasn't. Not really.

A loud squeak jolts me as I step into something squishy. "What the fu?—?"

"Language," she admonishes me, wagging her finger. "It's just a toy. One of the million you've sent over the past few months."

I lift an eyebrow, my gaze moving around the foyer and then into the kitchen toward the back of the house. It's a minefield of toddler toys.

"She likes to be able to see everything she has so the toy chests really aren't too effective." Allie blows a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "It doesn't help that Amazon boxes by the truckful show up every other day with deliveries for her."

I snicker. "Careful or I'll up the frequency to daily."

Allie rolls her eyes. "If you do that, I will seriously have to move. As it is, it feels like we're growing out of this place and it's only the two of us."

Her shoulders slump, her eyes darkening. I drop my gaze to the floor.

It's like a huge ass elephant in the room.

I never understood why people celebrated the anniversary of loved ones' deaths. It always seemed morbid to me, why you'd want to dwell on that moment as opposed to all the great ones.

But losing Davis the way we did, feeling that sliver of hope that things could go back to normal only to have it incinerated by the doctor's words... I'm so sorry, he's gone ...how the fuck can I not constantly replay it, today of all days?

And I hate like hell it's my niece's birthday.

I suck in a breath, paste on a fake smile, and hold up the bags. "Sorry, I've gotta add more to the mix today. The rest are in the truck that just pulled up behind me."

Her eyes pop open wide in horror, color dripping from her face. "Please tell me you're not serious."

I chuckle. "Your face was priceless. I wish I'd have snapped a picture."

Allie lets out a sigh, I guess of relief. But can she blame me? How could I not spoil the kid, especially for her birthday?

So I let her believe there really isn't another truck behind me. It's the path of least resistance.

"Unca Bee," a tiny voice cries out, followed by the slapping of bare feet against the tile floor.

I reach down to grab Julianna around the waist when she comes flying at me. Gripping her tight, I toss her into the air. Her blonde hair fans out as she sails upward.

Her belly laughs get me every time. So damn contagious.

I hold her up and blow raspberries on her pudgy belly. "Happy birthday, Jujubee," I say. "How old are you today?"

“Two,” she yells.

“So smart.” I set her back down on the floor and hand her the gift bags. Her eyes light up like Fourth of July fireworks and she drags them into the living room to tear into them. Allie covers her face with her hands.

“Papa, I got presents,” Julianna says. The rustle of paper follows. I cringe at the sound of my father’s voice. Why the fuck did he have to be here now ?

“Don’t worry. I’ll help clean up.” I wink at Allie, ignoring the knot twisting my gut when I hear his footsteps in the hallway .

She narrows her eyes at me. “Oh, you’d better believe you will.”

I shrug. “I don’t understand why you bother when she tears the place apart again the second things are in order.”

“Because I can’t live like I’m trapped inside of a toybox?” Allie shakes her head.

But her words fade out when my father’s dark eyes meet mine.

They’re accusatory and cold.

Just like always.

“Hey, Dad,” I say, my mind going completely blank after the greeting because what the hell else do I really have to say that wouldn’t completely sever the very delicate ties that still somewhat hold us together?

“Brixton.” He pauses. “I didn’t realize you’d be in town today.”

“Yeah, well, we’re playing the Sun Arena tonight.” I can barely croak out the words through the lump in my throat. I’d told our manager when we were arranging tour dates that this date was to be avoided at all costs and that he needed to pull it from the schedule. But money talks, and once the dollar value of a sold-out Sun Arena show was calculated into the tour revenue figures, I was told it was going to be added on.

I haven’t been back to the Sun Arena since that night.

And to add insult to injury, I can’t spend the time I want with the two people on the planet who actually give a shit about me today because I have to relive the beginning of the nightmare all over again.

A flicker of a shadow eclipses his stoic look. “You’re playing a concert? Tonight?”

I bring a hand to the back of my neck and fist my hair. “Yeah, the record company added the extra date on the calendar.” I force my lips to curl upward. “Hey, do you want to come along? You could stay in the VIP box and watch from there. It’s not loud and you’d have a great view?—”

“You really think I would want to go to some concert tonight?” His voice is incredulous, like I just suggested he paint his whole body blue.

“It wouldn’t be just some concert. It’d be me on stage.” I give my head a shake. “You’ve never seen one of my shows.”

He scoffs. “How can you even think of performing? Don’t you have any respect?”

A rush of breath expels from my lungs, the rejection slicing into my heart like a dagger with a searing hot blade. “It wasn’t my choice.”

“You’re the star, right? You don’t get a say?” he snaps.

“Richard,” Allie says, laying a hand on his arm. “Come on. You know he’s not trying to be disrespectful?—”

I hold up a hand at Allie. “No, it’s fine. I’ve got this.” Then I turn back to my father, my pulse hammering a hole in the side of my neck. “You think I don’t care? That I don’t miss him every day? That I don’t wish it had been me every freaking day ?”

“But it wasn’t.” Dad squares his shoulders. “And now he’s gone, even though he had such a full life here with his fiancée and his beautiful daughter.”

“So because I’m single, my life isn’t full and therefore, isn’t worth anything?” My eyes narrow into a glare at my father.

“You’ll never have what he did. You’re not the same.”

“Is this a dig because I’m gay? Or because I’m disrespectful? Or because I’m self-absorbed and locked in on my career?” I grit my teeth. “It’s always a new problem with you so forgive me for not being too swift on the uptake.”

Dad doesn’t say anything. Allie is stunned into silence. Hell, I don’t even hear either of them breathing.

Dad opens his mouth to say something but snaps it closed before the words are out. Doesn’t matter. His silence shouts volumes.

“I have to get going,” he mutters, slipping his feet into his shoes. He pulls on his jacket and moves past me. With a final nod at Allie, he opens the door and stomps out.

The door slams shut. My insides quake. Shit, I’m already to the point of damn near shattering. Why the hell couldn’t he have just made up a bullshit excuse about not

being able to make it, like he normally does when I ask?

Today, he had to twist the knife.

I know it doesn't help that I'm practically a carbon copy of Davis and my mom. I get that it must be hard to look at me and see everything he lost. But fuck, everything he still has stares right back at him. Why can't he recognize that ?

Allie puts a hand on my back. "Don't let him get to you. It's a hard day for all of us. He just..." She sighs. "He just has the worst way of dealing with it."

"He's been like that toward me for my whole life. If he didn't treat me like I was worthless, I'd be shocked to shit."

Allie shoots me a look. "Language," she hisses.

"Sorry."

I sink to my knees next to where Julianna tore into the gift bags. Ruffling her hair, I nod at all the toys and wrapping paper that litters the floor. "Are you gonna help me clean that up?" I ask her.

"Yes, Unca Bix."

Allie hands me a photo album. "Here, look at this. I put it together for Jules. What do you think?"

I pause, my fingers gripping the cover page of the album before I'm ready to open it. My heart aches as I flip through the pages of Davis and Allie throughout their relationship. I'm in some of them, ones where they came out to see Sin City perform and we posed for pictures afterward. There are pictures of them wandering around

wineries in Napa, engagement photos, and pictures of them visiting Italy, Sicily, and Portugal, their last big trip before Allie found out she was pregnant. They called it the babymoon.

My chest tightens at the selfie of them at the Sun Arena concert on the night Davis died.

The last picture they'd ever take together.

"I think it's perfect. She's going to love it." I struggle to get the words out, but I know Allie needs to hear them.

"I've been showing it to her every night before bed, pointing out Daddy and telling her all about our adventures." She raises a tear-filled gaze at me. "I want her to hear everything wonderful about him. And me telling her is the next best thing to her knowing from experience."

I nod because my throat is too tight to speak. I hand the album back to her and a white envelope falls out. Brows furrowed, I pick it up from the floor and hand it to her.

"Oh," Allie says, taking it from me. "I don't know how that ended up in here. It must have been mixed in with the photos."

"What is it?"

She takes a breath and stares at it. "A letter I got from the person who got Davis's heart."

I shoot up off the floor. "From the donor? Why didn't you ever tell me?"

“What good would it have been for you to know? The hospital forwarded it to me because they couldn’t divulge my address to him for privacy reasons.”

“So you have the name of the person?” I don’t know why but I have to see that letter. I have to know who took a part of my brother.

“Yes, but why even think about it now? It’s over. It was a nice gesture and it made me happy to know someone’s life was saved from that tragedy. ”

“I want to read it.”

“Brixton, what good will it do you?”

“I just need to read it. Please.”

Allie bites down on her lower lip and waits a hell of a lot longer than I’d like before handing it to me.

I pull the white sheet of paper out of the envelope and scan the contents. My nose tingles, tears thick in my throat as I pore over each sentence.

And then, my jaw drops, the final blow coming with crushing force when I get to the end of the letter. I almost choke on a gasp when I look down at Allie, her eyes pooling with tears.

God bless you and your family,

Chase Hartley

She knew. She fucking knew. And she never told me.

Chapter 5

Sam

PRESENT DAY

“Y ou had a helluva fucking game, Hartley.” Bryce Maxwell, the star quarterback for the Oakland Saints, claps me on the back as we run through the tunnel at Allegiant Stadium after we just clinched the number one seed in the National Football Conference, beating the Tennessee Raptors 42 to 22. “I think you might be the first tight end in the past fifty-seven years who’s on track to win the MVP.”

I stop short and pull off my helmet. “Are you fucking crazy, Maxwell? You can’t go around saying shit like that. The playoffs haven’t even started yet. How the hell can you even think about the Super Bowl right now?”

“Yeah, well, we won by twenty today. And the Super Bowl ain’t a pipe dream, that’s for sure.” Bryce chuckles. “I’ve got good reason to be cocky. Tennessee choked on us today, and they will be in very good company. Trust me. I’ve got three rings to prove I know what I’m talking about. We’re a shoo-in for the Super Bowl. My goal is five rings before I retire, and you’re gonna help me get the rest.”

Aaron Waller, one of the wide receivers, collides with my other side. “Is Maxwell talking smack again about Tennessee?” He reaches around me and pokes Bryce. “Did you take a big hit to the head? You’re gonna jinx us, man.”

“Today was our day, and I’m confident about the postseason. Sue me.”

Aaron shakes his head at me. “He’s kinda right about today. The Raptors couldn’t make a single pass without us intercepting. And you were in the end zone more today than you have been the whole season.”

I roll my eyes. “Only because I’m picking up the slack for you.”

“Ah ha,” Aaron gives me a punch in the arm. “Seems like someone else is a little cocky, too. Were you showing off for someone out there?”

Bringing a hand to the back of my neck, I look away and shrug. “Just doing my job. And half the time I’m covering your ass.”

“Don’t cover me too much, brah. The afterparty is gonna be my time to shine.” He waggles his eyebrows at me.

As the only other “out” player on the Saints, Aaron and I can joke in private like that. It’s hard to be one of so few gay players in the NFL, but over the past couple of years, we’ve built a small network of guys we can trust and confide in when things get dicey. It’s good to know there are others who have our backs because not everyone is tolerant of our sexuality. And players we know have had it pretty damn rough, like Bryce’s brother, Jase Maxwell, tight end on the Cincinnati Crusaders.

We trudge into the locker room and collapse on a bench. My body aches from head to toe and I want to stand under the steaming shower spray until every crick, knot, and pull is effectively soothed.

“You got any big plans tonight?” Aaron asks .

A weird tingly feeling erupts in my gut. “Yeah, my brother and I are going to see Sin City tonight at the Sun Arena with a few guys.”

“Fuck me,” Aaron breathes. “Brixton Scott is the hottest rock star on the planet. I’d bend over in a hot second for him.”

I force a laugh.

The night we met in that hospital chapel started out as the worst one of my life. But then God gave my family the miracle we’d been praying for. And Brixton’s brother came through, too, from what he’d said.

That has to mean something. Even in the depths of despair, I felt something in that chapel, a fierce spark that ignited in the darkness of my heart.

At that point, I thought he was sent there by some unknown power to comfort me, help me come to terms with what I was sure was about to happen. But thinking back, I believe it was a glimpse of what was to come when the timing was right.

He’s never publicly come out but there have been rumors floating around about his sexuality for years. I’ve never seen him photographed with another guy, either. But I know what I felt. And the look that flickered in his eyes is burned into my memory.

He felt it, too.

A tiny shudder ripples through me.

Tonight could be it.

So when Bryce told me his cousin Lane, the drummer for the band, had given him tickets for the VIP suite for the concert, I thought maybe we really were destined to meet again. It’s been two years and I’ve thought about him...and that night...a lot.

If I’m being honest, I’ve done a hell of a lot more than think. I’ve watched his

interviews, flipped through his pictures, seen his YouTube videos, all the while fantasizing about what could have been.

Chase will be with us tonight at the show. Sin City is his favorite rock band and he's been talking about it nonstop since Bryce invited us. Our worlds are going to collide again tonight and I'm hoping that this time, they won't just part ways after the concert ends.

"My brother is a big fan. He's been climbing the walls all week waiting for tonight."

"Speaking of climbing, I'd happily spend a lifetime climbing Brixton Scott." Aaron snickers and stretches his arms overhead before standing up.

He wanders over to a set of lockers, leaving me alone with the thoughts that have been looping through my mind over the past week. I never told anyone other than Chase that I met Brixton. It seemed too private, too intimate.

Not even Bryce knows.

I could have probably reached out to Brixton afterward since Bryce's cousin is his bandmate. I'm sure he could have made some arrangement for me to get in touch. But then I'd have had to tell Bryce how I knew Brixton. It just made me feel weird to tell anyone else about the experience.

The other thing that gnaws at my gut is that he could have gotten in touch, too.

But he didn't.

Then again, Sin City took off like a shot right about that time. I'm sure he's been focused on plenty of more important things.

And since I definitely didn't want to be seen as some desperate groupie clamoring for his attention, I left things alone. Kept the past in the past.

But tonight...who knows?

Maybe that feeling will come rushing back .

Or maybe it was just the overabundance of emotion of the night that amplified the spark between us two years ago.

Coach Hayes claps his hands to get our attention. "Nice work out there, guys. But we still have a long road ahead of us. Playoffs start next week and even though we got the bye, we need to keep our heads in the game. This isn't the time to take a breather."

He runs through some of the plays where we fell short, but because Tennessee wasn't on their game, our missteps didn't hurt us.

"This game is all about teamwork. We win together, we lose together. We do whatever needs to be done to succeed." With a nod at me, he says, "Take Hartley here. You scored three touchdowns today. That's not the typical job of his position, but he had the opportunities and he took them. We beat Tennessee today because they lost their focus. We ran circles around them because they didn't work together and it cost them a chance to make the playoffs."

Coach goes on for a few more minutes and with each one that ticks past, my body becomes more and more stiff. I can practically feel the scalding water sizzling my skin.

When he finally walks out of the locker room, Bryce walks over. "Let's meet at the arena around seven tonight. I'll text you the ticket codes."

“Okay, sounds good.”

Bryce pushes back the hair spilling into his eyes. “I’m kinda surprised they’re playing tonight. Especially at that arena.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

Bryce’s lips pull together into a tight line and he steps closer to me. “Look, I know Chase is looking forward to meeting him tonight but I don’t think that’s going to happen. Two years ago, Brixton’s brother died in a bad car accident. It was right after a show the band did at the Sun Arena. ”

My throat tightens, swelling around the massive lump now lodged there. “He...died?” I manage to croak out after a few seconds.

“Yeah, he’s a pretty private person and didn’t want anyone outside of the band and his immediate family to know. There was nothing in the press or anything like that. Because Lane’s our cousin, we found out. But his family kept everything really small to keep the press away.”

Bryce shakes his head. “It was bad. And he’s been kind of a mess ever since then. Tonight is the anniversary of his brother’s death and supposedly, he’s not in great shape. My cousin said he’s been MIA and they haven’t been able to find him. He does this sometimes, though, so they think he’ll show up at the arena. I just wouldn’t count on a meet and greet after the show.”

I watch Bryce walk toward the showers, my jaw still sore after hitting the floor when I heard the news.

Brixton’s brother died.

And Chase survived.

Never in a million years would I have expected that kind of a collision of fates.

What the heck are the odds?

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Chapter 6

Brixton

My eyes sting from the salty spray, legs aching as I crouch low on the surfboard and sail over the rough waters. The dark waves carry my board upward and into another swirling curl. The sky, which was bright and blue only a few hours ago, is now heavy and gray, thick with cloud cover that eclipses the sun.

It's nearing dusk, and Half-Moon Bay is pretty much deserted because who the hell in their right mind would take a chance and risk their life to surf under these shitty conditions?

White-capped crests whip against my tensed-up muscles, the aggression of the sea matching my own.

My eyes blur behind my sunglasses, every muscle tightening for the ride through the massive barrel ahead. It has to be at least eighteen feet high. The open bottle of Jack Daniel's in the front seat of the rental should have been enough of a warning to stay off this board and away from waves that could crush my internal organs if I make one wrong move. Instead, it only made me embrace the self-destructive tear I've been on, the one I managed to conceal from Allie this afternoon .

Barely.

I had to get out of there before the facade cracked.

Splintered bits of that letter pierce my brain like the sharpest razor blades. Knowing that a piece of Davis still lives should bring me peace but instead, it just pisses me off.

“He had so fucking much to live for,” I bellow into the air, my voice barely audible over the sound of the crashing waves. “Goddammit, it should have been me.”

And there it is, the thing that’s been plaguing me for the past two years. Davis was about to be a husband and father. All I’d been doing with my life is dicking around with my guitar and microphone. The guilt that God chose him over me eats away at my insides, feasting on every shred and savoring it to prolong the goddamn torment.

He was always so supportive of my career. There was no way he’d have missed that show, but fuck, I wish with everything in me that he had.

My mind is fuzzy from the booze and splitting from the angry horde of voices commanding my thoughts. Water sprays my sunglasses, piercing my skin like tiny needles. The board propels upward, riding the barrel as it grows higher and higher. And then my fucking foot slips.

With a fierce, thundering tempo, my heart nearly explodes out of my chest as the wave sweeps my board out from under me. The sunglasses fly off my face. I gasp for air before I even hit the water. The waves thrash around me when I hit the surface, arms covering my head, the loud slap of my wetsuit slamming into the crests.

Thank fuck I fell backward. At least there’s a silver lining.

But the wave fights me for air. It flips and rolls me around and I know I shouldn’t fight. I know from years of experience that I should just let it carry me, but panic bubbles in my constricted chest and I flail and flounder as the wave ravages my body.

I cough and choke and sputter as my head pops in and out of the water. Keeping one arm over my head since I have no fucking clue what happened to my board, I somehow manage to propel myself through the dark, ominous swells, My biceps burn with each stroke. The force of the surf constricts my chest, challenging my lungs to struggle for oxygen.

I squint at the shore in front of me, and that's when I see a cluster of jagged rocks jutting from a nearby cove. Terrific, maybe a great white might start circling, too. Really make it a fucking party.

Hoping my board landed somewhere far behind me, I drag myself through the surf when a set of breakers cuts toward me.

Why the fuck did I think it was a good idea to drink and then surf? Allie would be so angry if she knew where I was right now. She tried to get me to stay after that tense exchange with my father, tried to calm me down. But I needed to get away from there. Too many memories...toxic and otherwise...plagued me.

And now I'm headed for certain annihilation by way of those damn rocks. With a deep breath, I dive forward. Another wave assaults me, this one driving me straight into the rocks. I suck in what I sure as hell hope isn't my last breath and kick as hard as I can to get myself out of the wave.

Seconds feel like hours. By some miracle, I manage to edge myself out of the line of fire for the rocks and my feet finally hit the sandy shore. I drag myself out of the water, my lungs on fire, my legs like Jell-O. I collapse onto the sand, my breaths shallow and ragged. Staring at the darkening sky, my chest shudders. Wet strands of hair stick to the sides of my face.

I don't know how long I lie here or what time it is, for that matter .

Fuck time.

Fuck obligation.

I bring my hands to the sides of my head and fist the hair.

“You got a death wish or something?”

I twist around at the intruding voice.

He doesn't realize how close to the truth he is.

Tyler Desmond, the band's manager, is trudging toward me.

“Little overdressed for the beach,” I say in a flat tone, collapsing onto my back again. I fling an arm over my eyes.

“Brix, you were supposed to be at the arena an hour ago. What the hell are you doing out here, anyway? Are you trying to drown? The fucking beach is closed for a reason.”

“I didn't see the sign,” I grumble. “How'd you find me anyway? You got a tracker on me or something?”

Tyler sinks onto the sand next to me because that's the kind of guy he is. Looking sharp in a suit and he still puts his train wreck of a client first over style. “I got a call from PR. There was a report of a guy who looked suspiciously like Brixton Scott spotted at a surf shop not too far from here.”

“I'm sure the fact that I used a credit card with my name on it didn't tip anyone off.” I let out a snort. “Shit, I shoulda paid cash.”

Tyler pauses for a minute. “Look, Brix. You’re a hell of a talent but you’ve got to get your head together. The label isn’t happy with you pulling these disappearing acts every time you get a bug up your ass.”

I grit my teeth. “So what, are they gonna threaten to drop us because I’m having a hard time? Don’t I go out there and work my ass off for them, night after fucking night? A little sensitivity might be nice, especially after they screwed me over and scheduled this fucking show tonight.”

“Brix, you know we’re all on your side. The guys are worried about you and so is the label. It has nothing to do with money.” He lifts an eyebrow. “But you have to understand why they’d be concerned that one of their biggest stars decided to take on a very angry ocean under the influence of what smells a hell of a lot like Jack Daniel’s.”

“Today is a hard day, okay?” I shoot straight up, my head a little fuzzy from the sudden movement.

“What about every other day? I get it. You lost Davis and it sucks. I’ve been there. I know how it feels. But you can’t let it break you. I’ve been with you from the beginning. I know you. I knew him. I knew you guys together. You think he’d want to see you falling down this rabbit hole? Hell no. He’d kick your ass. And I’m sure Allie already has. You’ve got everything to live for. Start acting like it. You’re attracting a lot of negative attention and you have to think about more than just you. The guys are worried about you and about the future of the band.”

“Look, with all due respect, Tyler, you don’t fucking know what I’m going through. Davis wasn’t sick, okay? He was supposed to be okay. Those fucking asshole doctors told me he’d be okay after surgery. They said he was good, for fuck’s sake. And then I went to the chapel to pray and...and be fucking thankful that he’d been spared except?—”

The words tumble so fast from my lips that I barely have time to catch them. I struggle to my feet and pace in front of Tyler.

“Except he wasn’t. He was stolen from us. And I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye. I should have fucking stayed with him.” I scrub my hands down the front of my face. “But he sent me away. He wanted me to be with the girls. Maybe he fucking knew and didn’t want me to see what was gonna happen next. I didn’t get to tell him I love him, that he was the best big brother I could ever want, that he was the only father I ever needed. He was my family, my best friend. And he was yanked away from us without any warning. It’s not fucking fair, goddammit. Okay?”

I kick at the sand as Tyler watches.

“And to top it off, the only immediate family I have left is a father who hates me and blames me for my mom’s and Davis’s deaths. So pardon fucking me that my head isn’t always in the game and that I’m not the team player that everyone wishes I was.”

A lump jams the back of my throat. Jesus, how is it possible that I feel more alone with Tyler here than I did when I was floundering around like shark bait in that ocean?

Maybe it’s because when I was sucked under the water, I felt closer to death and everything I lost.

How fucking ironic is it that skirting the line between life and death brought me more peace than I’ve felt in years?

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:58 am

Chapter 7

Sam

I guzzle a cold bottle of Fiji water from the bar, the chilled liquid simmering the heat flooding my insides. The raw and haunting melody of the new hit song by Sin City makes the hairs on my arms spring to attention. My eyes are glued to Brixton Scott as he slams on his guitar.

His voice makes my skin prickle and my heart thump hard. It mesmerizes me, captivates me, pulls me into the dark abyss of his emotions. My head swims with X-rated thoughts as his breathy, gritty timbre flirts with my senses.

With a thrumming pulse, I follow his every move across the stage as the band performs their encore. He's dressed all in black, right down to the steel-toed boots on his feet. His hair is dark and thick, long enough to fall over his blue eyes, long enough for me to drag my fingers through it and fist it hard just like I've done in my fantasies.

I remember those eyes, the glowing flames that flickered in the depths.

Damn, the memory still gives me chills. Two years have done nothing to extinguish the embers that smolder in my gut every time I think about him.

Taking another long gulp of water is definitely not the equivalent of a cold shower, which I could probably use right now because staring at Brixton for a second too long can make me harder than a steel rod.

And that would be very inconvenient, especially in present company.

I bring a hand to the back of my neck and rub my skin in an attempt to eliminate the trace of goosebumps and Brixton's overall effect on me.

"Sammy," Jase Maxwell says in a loud voice, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

Twisting my head to look at him, I force a smile. "Yep. Sorry. I think I zoned out there for a second."

Jase grins. "I'll give ya a pass, especially after the insane game you played today. I hope you're not too broken to meet tomorrow. Lucas and I want to stop by Play It Forward to check on things before we head home, you know, just meet some of the kids, hang around for a while to see how things are running. That kind of thing."

I nod. "Yeah, good idea. I'll be there."

Jase and Lucas formed an organization in Cincinnati about a year and a half ago that provides sports training and after-school leagues to underprivileged kids who can't necessarily afford to play with private clubs like a lot of their classmates. After it gained tremendous popularity and sponsorship, Bryce got involved to run an affiliate organization here in Oakland and asked me to join him, which I did.

Casting a glance at my brother Chase, who is plastered against the front of the box and transfixed by the last bit of the band's performance, I remember the vow I made once he pulled through. He got a heart transplant which gave him his life back. And I committed to give back however I could, to show my gratitude and appreciation.

Over the past two years, I've worked with a handful of charity and volunteer organizations, the latest being with Bryce at Play It Forward. It's grown by leaps and

bounds since we opened our doors six months ago, and we're about to recruit our next wave of volunteers.

I have a lot to be grateful for. Not only do I have my brother and best friend by my side, but I also have the greatest freaking job in the world that pays me a crap ton of cash. I'm lucky. We're lucky. So many people aren't, and the least I can do is give them something to look forward to, some shred of hope.

For a long time, I'd lost hope and it sucked to feel so lost and alone. I'd never wish that on my worst enemy.

"We can do a piece on the expansion of the center," Rex Ashton, my, Bryce, and Jase's agent, says. "It'll raise awareness and drive the volunteer numbers up. Donations, too."

"Good idea," Jase says. "How fast can you put a press release together?"

The guys keep talking but my mind is still on the sexy as hell singer down below. My eyes sneak another glance at the stage at the same time Brixton looks up in the direction of the box. I've got a clear view of him, and a fierce shudder rocks me when his gaze locks on my face. The breath is literally sucked out of my body in that second. I'm unable to move, my foot rooted to the spot like they're stuck in a pool of hot tar.

It's ridiculous to think he can see me all the way up here, although maybe Lane told him I'd be with Bryce, Jase, and Lucas in the suite. My palms start to sweat, and I rub them down the front of my jeans.

Then the spell is broken without warning and he strides across the stage, focused on the thousands of other pairs of eyes anxiously drinking him in as the band finishes their final song.

Chase turns, a wide smile on his face. “That was so incredible. They’re amazing.” He looks at Jase and Bryce. “I can’t thank you guys enough for the chance to see them tonight.”

I clap a hand on my brother’s shoulder. “Good celebration surprise?”

“The best.”

“How about we keep the surprise going?” Jase winks at me. “You up for it?”

My heart lodges in my throat, anticipation putting me in a tight chokehold. “What’d you have in mind?”

“There’s a place not too far from here. Doc’s Corner Tavern. The guys like to unwind there whenever they play Oakland. It’s kind of a dive where they can get lost and just chill without anyone bothering them. You guys down?” Bryce looks between us.

Chase’s eyes practically pop out of his skull. “Hell yeah, we are.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Don’t you have to be at the hospital early tomorrow?”

My brother rolls his eyes. “I’ll catch up on sleep in the on-call room, like I usually do.”

“I’m sure your patients will be so excited to hear that. Here’s hoping they get you after that nap.” Lucas smirks and holds up a beer bottle.

“I’m a fifth year resident. I’ve learned how to operate on no sleep.” He smirks. “Let’s fucking go!”

We pile into the waiting Escalade and it takes us through one of the rougher parts of

the city, one I'm not really familiar with and I've lived in the area for years. The truck stops alongside a black cement building. Jase pushes open the door and jumps out, followed by Bryce and Lucas .

"Holy shit, I can't believe we're going to meet the band," Chase mutters. "How fucking cool is this?"

That's when Bryce's earlier words blare out in my mind.

"Listen, don't fanboy too hard. I heard Brixton's had kind of a tough time lately. Turns out the night I met him, his brother died."

"So it's two years for him too," Chase muses. "That really sucks."

"Tell me about it. I can't imagine how things would be without you." I shrug. "So, ya know, just keep it cool. I don't even know if he'll show up with the rest of the guys."

"Got it." Chase slides across the bench seat and hops out of the truck.

I follow Chase into the bar, struggling to move my feet since they keep getting stuck on the sticky floor. Dark walls and low purplish-blue light give the place an ominous feel. The bar is packed with tough-looking guys in leather cuts and stringy beards shooting drinks. Nobody turns to look at us when we walk in, nobody gives us a glance as we file into a roped-off corner lined with dark velvet couches riddled with burn marks.

Since smoking in bars has been banned for a long damn time, I've gotta wonder what decade the furniture's from...and how much activity these couches have gotten over those years. Jase hails someone over and a minute later, a few buckets of beers show up at the table.

I grab one and pop off the top before taking a long gulp. The cool liquid lands in my empty stomach, and I really wish I'd have eaten something back at the arena suite. The last thing I had today was a steak right after the game with Chase and my parents, but that was hours ago.

Chase nudges me. "Don't look now but the band just showed up. "

My head jerks in the direction of the three guys walking toward the bouncer and the rope.

Three.

My gut plummets into my shoes.

"I guess you were right," Chase says under his breath. "He didn't show up after all."

"Can't blame the guy." I force out the words, inexplicably disappointed that I won't see him. For all this time, I really believed we'd find each other again when the timing was right.

But I guess when the door closes, you've gotta say goodbye.

He's suffering, just like I'd be. Why would he want to be here, tonight of all nights?

I let out a sigh. Carrying a torch for a guy who was probably a casual fan at best is just fucking stupid. Just because he recognized me doesn't mean he wanted anything more from me. For those fleeting minutes, even in the depths of my grief, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were meant to meet.

And it's plagued me ever since that night. Yeah, I've dated guys since then but I haven't met anyone who lit the kind of flame in me that Brixton did.

He was the first person I wanted to tell when Rae told us Chase was getting a heart, which is ridiculous since we'd only just met. But somehow, I felt like we were almost...I don't know...kindred spirits or something. Both of us almost losing a brother, both of us finding out our brothers would make it.

Then he lost his...

And all this time, he's been grieving when I figured for sure, it'd be me in that situation.

I guzzle the rest of my beer and then stand up. "I'll be back."

Peering through the hazy blue light, I find the sign for restrooms and push my way through the crowd hovering outside the roped-off area. I keep my head down, trying to ignore the sidelong glances of the people surrounding me.

Nobody comes up to me.

Nobody asks for a selfie or an autograph.

I'm not in the mood for any of it.

I finally duck away from the crowd and make a left down a dark corridor, following the right-pointing arrow for the men's room. Head hung low, I look up a second too late, my shoulder colliding with something hard.

Angry eyes, laser-focused on me, spit out white-hot flames.

I swallow hard, stumbling backward into the wall.

"You," Brixton Scott growls through clenched teeth.

“Uhh...” Words completely evade me as he lances into me with that sadistic stare. What the fuck is that all about? He glowers at me like he wants to claw me apart with his bare hands. “Yeah, me. I, um, I’m really sorry about your brother. I only just heard he passed away that night.”

Shit, why did I say that? Why did I say anything? Brixton is obviously on a warpath, why the hell would I incite him by bringing up his brother?

“Tell me something.” Brixton ignores what I said and takes a few steps toward me, closing the space between us. His cologne catches in my throat, damn near choking me to death.

Or maybe he’s trying to kill me with his mind. Sure seems like it with that hateful expression on his face.

I did only have one beer, right?

Why the hell does it feel like I’ve tripped into some alternate reality where the guy I’ve secretly been pining for looks like he wants to bury a machete in my chest for no apparent reason?

“Is Chase Hartley your brother?”

My jaw drops. This is so not the reunion I fantasized about. This guy isn’t grieving. He’s fucking murderous .

“Yeah.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Why?”

Brixton leans in close, his lips practically hovering over mine. His eyes are bloodshot, his breath is hot against my face and reeks of stale liquor.

I watch his face twist into a grimace.

“Because,” he hisses. “Two years ago, I lost my best friend. And your brother got his heart.”

Chapter 8

Brixton

I glare at Sam as my words pelt the air like bullets. Color drains, shock seeping into his confused expression.

“Brixton, I—I didn’t know,” he sputters. “We didn’t have anything to do with the transplant. Donors are always anonymous. Chase had been on a waiting list for years and that was the night they got one. We had no idea it was your brother who saved his life.”

Then he reaches for my arm. His palm scalds my skin, fingertips sending electrical pulses shooting up to my shoulder.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Your brother was dying, not mine.” Anger bubbles deep in my chest, my gaze dropping to his hand. “For two years, I’ve had to live without him when Chase has the only part of him that’s still living.”

My vision blurs, head foggy from the whiskey I downed on the way here.

After Tyler found me at Half-Moon Bay, there hadn’t been time to think about that letter. He made sure I was occupied from the second we got to the venue and didn’t leave my side until we took the stage. I didn’t tell him about what happened at Allie’s, and he didn’t ask since he’s used to my shit. The guys were concerned that I’d taken off again and when they asked, I wouldn’t say why. It hurt too much to think about, much less talk about.

Lane would be the only one I'd tell but when he casually said Lucas, Jase, and fucking Sam Hartley were in the VIP suite, I silently spiraled.

I don't know how I even made it through the show. Snippets from that letter wallpapered my mind and floated in front of my eyes, a voice I'd never heard before reading the painful words as I tried to focus on what the hell was happening on stage. Then when the guys said they wanted to hit Doc's afterward, I said I was going back to the hotel.

But knowing Sam was going changed my mind. I needed to unleash the fury on someone and he seemed like the right mark. Why the fuck not? He got what he wanted and I was the one who was robbed. And if I'm being honest, a small part of me has been gnawed apart by guilt because of the spark I'd felt in the chapel with him. He was grieving and I was thinking about things that God obviously felt the need to punish me for.

Maybe if I'd never had those thoughts, Davis would be here today. I wasn't praying for him to survive because I thought he was in the clear. Maybe if I'd kept my focus on something other than what I'd have liked to do to Sam, he'd have been saved after all.

Now I hate like hell that I felt anything for Sam Hartley. It feels almost like...betrayal. That I chose lust over my brother. That may sound fucked up but it's how I feel. And it's why I'm shaking with anger now, because I'm choked by something similar to what I felt that night.

I need to get the fuck away from him.

Gritting my teeth, I pull my arm out of Sam's grip. "Don't fucking touch me. You have no idea what I've gone through since that night."

He nods. “And I’m so thankful for that. I can’t imagine how hard it’s been on you. But this isn’t on me or Chase or my parents. You know it but you want to blame someone for what happened and I’m the closest target. Fine. Say whatever you want. But you know as well as I do that attacking me for a decision I didn’t make won’t bring your brother back.”

Sharp pains shoot through my insides like lasers, igniting my fury. I fist the sides of his shirt and back him farther against the wall. He lets me, doesn’t put up a fight. He just stares at me.

“Stop being so fucking rational. I want to tear your head off your body right now,” I growl.

“You know it won’t help. It’ll only bring you more bad press.”

My vision floods with red. “Oh, and you think you know me after reading a few tabloid articles?”

He lifts an eyebrow. “I know enough to say that guys who have their heads screwed on straight don’t go looking for trouble at bars.”

I ball my hands into fists. “You don’t know anything about my life.”

“And I’m not pretending to. But you’re in the public eye. A huge star. Do you think your brother would want you to throw it all away because of what happened?”

I recoil. “Fuck you, Hartley. Little Mr. Fucking Perfect. Your golden halo is blinding me, brah. What are you trying to prove with all your do-gooder work? Huh? You got skeletons in your closet or something? What the hell are you trying to make up for?”

“You don’t know anything about me either,” he says through clenched teeth.

We stand there, toe to toe, heated gazes locked on each other. My head spins, clouded with a carnal mix of desire and fury. I don't know whether I want to punch him in the jaw or crush my lips against his.

"Hey, B. Where the hell have you been?"

I slowly turn my head in Lane's direction. He looks between us, his eyebrows furrowed.

"You guys know each other?"

With a tight nod, Sam pushes me away from him and rounds the corner, leaving us alone.

"Dude, what the hell is up with you? You look like you wanna kill that guy."

I rake a hand through my hair and slam the other hand against the wall for support.

"Forget it." Pushing past him, I let out a sigh. But he grabs my wrist and yanks me back.

"Tell me what the hell is up with you. Let me help you."

I shake off his hand. "I don't need help. I'm fucking fine."

"You couldn't be further from fine if you were in another universe."

My throat tightens. He's right. I'm obviously nowhere close to fine. I can't even really touch "okay." Completely fucked is way closer to where I am right now.

"Come on, nobody really gives a shit, Lane. Everyone wants their payday and I'm the

weak link right now. You know it. Don't pretend to give a damn about what I'm going through."

Hurt flashes on his face and my gut clenches. I'm being a dick but I can't stop myself. And of all those guys, Lane isn't the one who deserves it. The rest of the band is more concerned about how my actions impact our social media standings but Lane actually cares. We grew up together and he knew Davis for years before he died.

My shoulders slump and I collapse backward against the wall .

Maybe I want him to feel like shit, too. Misery loves company and all that.

I figured if I was an asshole, he'd tell me so and walk away. He's not.

Dammit.

"Talk to me. You look like..."

His voice trails off, his unspoken words hanging in the air.

Like you lost your best friend.

I did. And it fucking hurts.

I pull myself away from the wall, my lips pulled into a tight line. "Lay the fuck off, Lane. I'm done talking about this."

"You never started. I've tried to be here for you for all this time but all you do is shut me the hell down. I actually give a damn about you. Why the hell is that so hard for you to swallow?"

My pulse throbs against the side of my throat. “What the fuck do you want to hear? That I feel like a walking zombie most days? That I can barely live with the fact that I walked away without a scratch and my brother died?”

I can’t bring myself to tell him about Sam and Chase and the letter. Even thinking of those words guts me worse than any knife could.

“You’re being too hard on yourself. He wouldn’t have wanted this for you. He was so proud of you, Brix. It was an accident.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t accept that. I pissed God off that night. Davis was supposed to live. That’s what the doctors told me. Like, God was on my side and then switched teams for some reason. And I’m so fucking angry.” I grab his jacket and tug it tight. “I wanted to go instead of Davis. I would have traded my life in a second for him to get his back.”

“You know that’s not how it works. And you’re destroying yourself because of it. Don’t fucking go and try to kill yourself surfing because you feel survivor’s guilt. This self-destructive bullshit isn’t gonna bring Davis back.”

“Don’t tell me how to handle this. You don’t understand.” My voice is flat even though blood rushes between my ears.

“I’m your family. I’m always going to be here for you.”

My jaw sets. “Not like Davis was.”

The second I say it, I want to suck the words back in. The shock and rejection on his face twist my gut even more.

“You’ve become a real fucking asshole, you know that?” Lane seethes. “Next time,

think again about alienating the only one who gives a shit enough to help.”

He pushes past me, jamming my arm with his shoulder as he stalks back to the main area. I let out a deep sigh and push back my hair.

I can't leave like this. I need to apologize.

Rounding the corner in the direction of the VIP area, I notice a hot blonde with huge tits edging toward Lane, licking her lips as she looks at him.

She's clearly hungry for our drummer.

He gives her an appraising look as he passes.

I shove my way forward and just as I'm about to grab his arm, something hard crashes against my left shoulder. Stumbling sideways from the force, I see a huge bald guy in a leather cut push the blonde aside and give Lane a hard shove into a half wall.

Lane and I are pretty big guys but this one is twice our size, covered in tattoos and piercings. Two others who look almost exactly like him flank him on both sides.

He moves toward Lane. “I saw you give my girl the eye. She's mine, prick. I don't give a fuck that you're a rock star. I'm gonna fuck your shit up so that you won't be able to play the drums for the rest of your fucking life.”

I flex my ringed fingers before balling them into tight fists, rage coursing through me. The guy takes a punch and Lane ducks out of the way. But he doesn't escape the second one and the guy gets a clear shot to his nose. He staggers sideways, bringing his hand to his bloodied face.

He looks at me and I give him a slight nod.

“Hey,” I yell at the bald guy, edging around people to get to him. I give my neck a good crack, a slow smile lifting my lips.

“You messed with the wrong fucking crew tonight, dick.”

The guy laughs. “Fucking no talent prick. I’m supposed to be afraid of you?”

“Oh fuck yeah. And you know why?” My smile widens. “Two reasons. One, you touched my brother. And two, I don’t give a flying fuck about consequences. Prick. ”

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Chapter 9

Sam

Shouts and screams erupt outside the VIP area, drowning out the music. One of the security guys with the band pushes past us and shoves his way through the crowd in the direction Lane Maxwell went only a few minutes earlier. Jase and Lucas follow.

I turn to Chase.

“Stay here. I don’t know what’s going on out there but I’m going with Jase and Lucas.”

Chase’s eyes flash with anger. “I’m not made of glass, Sam. I’m going if you are.”

“Look, this isn’t exactly your crowd, okay? I’m used to huge guys rushing at me. It’s been a few years for you.” I press a hand against his chest. “Stay. I’m serious.”

I run after Jase and Lucas and stop short right before the shit show taking place on the makeshift dance floor.

Lane and Brixton are in the middle of a biker gang, and if I’m being honest, the bikers aren’t doing too well against the rockers.

The bouncers from the front door are pulling the guys apart. Band security is getting in on the action, too. Lane’s nose is bleeding, not that it slows him down at all. Brixton sidesteps one of the bouncers and lunges for a big bald guy, knocking him

backward into a group of people shining phones on the scene. He lands on top of the guy and swings his fists at the guy's face and gut.

“Never fucking lay a finger on one of my friends again,” he yells.

Jase and Lucas groan, probably seeing the exact same thing I do. And they're no strangers to being caught on video while brawling. Although theirs was a case of self-defense.

I narrow my eyes at Brixton.

The guy was ready to snap before Lane showed up.

Did he unleash all that rage on these guys just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time?

A nagging feeling in my gut tells me that's a very good possibility.

“We need to get them out of here,” Jase says, edging through the people surrounding them. He heads for Lane.

I head for Brixton.

He's still on top of the bald guy, now his fists are clenching the sides of the guy's cut and he's pulled him to a seated position. Blood pours from the guy's nose and Brixton's eyes have taken on a psycho glimmer.

I grab his arm and pull him backward. “You've got to get out of here now. There are phones everywhere.”

He slowly turns his head to look at me and fuck me, it's scary as all hell, like some

inner demon has taken over his body and mind. If his head starts spinning, I'm getting the hell out of here.

"I'm not done yet," he says.

It's a risk but I yank him to his feet. The bald guy collapses back on the floor but those damn phones keep flashing.

"Get your fucking hands off me. I don't need your help. And I don't fucking want it." His voice is low but I hear it damn clearly.

Forcing a smile, I tighten my grip on his arm and bring my head close to his. "If you don't want to end up in jail tonight, then you'll walk the fuck out of here now before the cops show up."

"Fuck jail. I didn't do anything wrong. I was defending my friend."

I wave a hand around me. "You think all those videos are going to tell the same story?"

Brixton glares at me but allows me to nudge him toward the exit.

"Take them through the back. Don't go to the front. We don't need any more hassles," Rex says, scrubbing a hand down the front of his face.

Sirens blare in the distance and one of the bouncers rushes us out the door.

"Shit," Ben mutters behind me.

"That motorcycle club has been giving us a lot of trouble over the past few months. Always starting shit. I hope this'll get rid of them for good." The bouncer checks up

and down the street before letting us out. “You’ve still got time.”

Three Escalades wait in a line. I peer over my shoulder. Chase is in the back with the rest of the band.

“Hurry up and get in,” Rex says to us, giving me a quick shove toward the first truck. I jump in the back, followed by Brixton, Ben, and Rex.

The door slams closed.

“Drive to the hotel,” Rex says. “Now.”

The Escalade speeds out of the lot and down the dark street. Once we get to the corner, flashing red lights fly past us in the opposite direction.

I let out a shaky breath and shoot off a text to Chase letting him know I’ll meet him back at my place after we get dropped off at the hotel.

“Fuck, that was close,” Ben mutters, pulling out his phone. He lifts an eyebrow at Brixton. “You want to tell me what that was all about so that I’m prepared for the social media fallout that I’m sure is only seconds away?”

Brixton lounges back against the leather cushioned seat. “Mr. Clean came at Lane for staring at his girl. I walked out of that hallway and saw him smash Lane in the jaw. Lane went down and I went after the guy and his buddies. I was defending my friend. Fuck anyone who tells it differently.”

“It’s all perception,” I say. “You know what happened to Jase and Lucas. What makes you think you’ll be saved when you just beat the hell out of a guy so bad, he couldn’t even get himself off the floor?”

“He’s lucky I didn’t yank out any of the metal hanging off his face.” Brixton’s lips curl upward into a nasty smirk. “Next time I bet he’ll think twice about taking a punch at someone. His dick must be the size of a peanut to be that wound up over a skanky ass girl checking out another dude.”

“You’re really twisted, you know that?” I roll my eyes.

“Whatever, choir boy. I protect the people I care about. Wouldn’t you have done the same thing? I mean, you are a do-gooder, yeah?”

“Screw you. How the hell am I the one on trial when it’s you who assaulted that prick?”

“It’s not assault if you’re defending someone,” he shoots back. “It’s self-defense.”

“How the hell is it self-defense when nobody attacked you ?” I narrow my eyes. “Although, if you’d given the guy a minute, I’m sure he’d have found one of many reasons to pummel your ass, too. ”

Rex snickers. “Can’t argue that.”

“Brixton’s actually right,” Ben says. “California law permits you to act in defense of not only yourself but others.”

Brixton chuckles. “Gotta love this state. And fuck you very much, Rex. Just so you know, I’m not gonna defend your scrawny ass if someone comes for it.”

A loud pinging sound rings out. Then another. And another. Suddenly, it sounds like a slot machine hitting a jackpot at a casino in here.

“Jesus Christ,” Ben moans, staring at his screen. “It’s already trending on X and the

videos are being uploaded everywhere. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram.” His phone bleeps, over and over and over until my ears ring.

“The label is going to flip the fuck out.” Rex shakes his head, staring at his own phone. “It may not be assault, but it still doesn’t look good for you, and that reflects on the band and the label. The lawyers will have to get involved, you’ll need to do a press release, then a press conference making a formal apology.”

“Fuck that.” Brixton stretches his arms overhead. “I’m not apologizing to anyone. I don’t have a damn thing to be sorry about except that I didn’t knock the guy unconscious.”

“You’re so sadistic,” I mutter.

“Some guys like that about me,” he murmurs back. “Don’t be so quick to judge if you don’t know what you’re missing, choir boy.”

Rex and Ben are too busy strategizing to listen to us.

My throat tightens when Brixton’s eyes, glittering with intent, capture mine.

“Holy shit,” Ben says, looking up from the screen. He hands his phone to Rex, whose jaw drops.

“Wait...what the?—?”

Suddenly, he picks his head up, his eyes wide as he looks from me to Brixton.

That look.

I don’t like it.

And I definitely don't trust it.

Rex holds up the phone.

“Brixton's ass kicking isn't the only thing trending right now.”

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Chapter 10

Brixton

Sam grabs Rex's phone. "They think we're..." His eyes practically bulge out of his sockets. "Together?"

A snide laugh escapes my lips.

As fucking if .

Saint Sam could never handle the devil inside of me.

"You think this is funny?" he says, shooting a glare in my direction.

"It's just stupid speculation," I say. "People idiotically assume because you're pulling me away from Mr. Clean that we're a thing."

And that's when my stomach does a dip.

A thing.

Oh, shit. That must mean...

"Looks like the rumors are confirmed. Brixton Scott is gay," Ben reads out loud, stroking his goatee.

I lift an eyebrow at Sam. “Did you just out me?”

A surprised look shadows his expression and then passes just as fast. He narrows his eyes. “Oh, so I’m getting blamed for that, too?”

“You should’ve left well enough alone,” I seethe, leaning toward him. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

“If I didn’t get you away from there, Christ only knows what those cameras would have picked up. I saved you. You should be thanking me, you ungrateful asswipe.”

I hold his strained gaze for a long minute. “I wouldn’t hold my breath for that one.”

Sam’s fists clench tight on the seat next to him. “I should have let you tear the guy’s head off. Then you’d be sitting in a jail cell right now for murder.”

“The angel and his demon.” Ben shakes his head and lets out a deep sigh. “Jesus, there are already memes. We’re already too damn late.”

Sam scrubs a hand down the front of his face then slams his hand against the seat.

“What do you look so frustrated about?” I ask. “I’m the one who beat the hell out of the guy. I’m the one who’ll take all the heat.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” The vein in Sam’s forehead pulses. “If people think we’re together, I’m part of your whole...bad boy rocker rampage. People will think I accept your shitty behavior and attitude, that I’m okay with you being a total douchebag.”

I hold a hand to my heart and let out a gasp of mock horror. “Oh no. So you’d be a bad boy too, then? What will all of your fans think? Will they cancel you because you’re associated with me?” With a roll of my eyes, I continue tapping my fingers

against the seat, the pace in time with the throbbing of my pulse. “There are bigger problems here than your precious reputation, Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes.”

“Unlike you,” Sam says, his eyes flashing with anger. “I try to be a good role model for my fans and the kids I volunteer for. I’m smart enough to realize that without them, I’d be nothing. And I actually care about keeping their respect.” He moves closer so that our heads practically touch. “You don’t give a damn about holding onto anyone’s respect because you clearly have none for yourself.”

“So now you’re trying to psychoanalyze me?” I snarl. “I thought we put that shit to bed once and for all.”

“Guys, enough. None of this is going to help fix this.” Ben rubs his temples. “We need to do some serious damage control. This will impact both of you, like it or not. And we need to spin it fast before it gets out of our control and it’s veering that way now. It’s not just the label and the band on the hook. Sam is involved, even if he didn’t throw a single punch. Perception always becomes reality. And if people think you really are together, it’ll cast a shadow over him, too.”

“I’m sure the league will have something to say about it, too. There’s a strict code of conduct and I’d be guilty by association. It’ll bring heat onto the team, too.” Sam rakes a hand through his hair. “I should’ve gone home after the damn show,” he mutters. Then he raises his dark eyes to mine. “Except I didn’t want to disappoint my brother. Your biggest fan. All he wanted to do was get a chance to meet you. I didn’t realize everything I’d be sacrificing to do something good for him. And for you, ingrate.”

That was like a donkey kick to the nuts. I wrap my fingers into tight fists. “Well, I don’t want to meet him anyway,” I say, the stress knot at the base of my skull sending a sharp pain straight down my spine.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem once he finds out what a jerkoff you really are.” Sam lets out a disbelieving laugh. “How are you the same guy?” he mumbles to himself. “And how the hell did I let myself get taken by him?”

I blink fast. Rex and Ben don’t show any signs of hearing what Sam just said but I heard every word, whether he wanted me to or not.

“The guy is being taken to the hospital,” Rex suddenly says, his forehead pinched. “He’s not in great shape.”

I tap my fingers on the seat, blowing out a breath. “So now what?”

Ben’s lips pull tight. “You’re going to make a formal apology to the guy, once he’s cleared at the hospital.”

“It’s bullshit. He started the whole thing.”

“You sound like an obstinate child.” Sam grimaces. “I can’t believe I tried to help you. You’re so far beyond anyone’s help.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ben’s eyebrows furrow. My gut knots in response.

He’s one of the very few who knows just how true those words are.

Ben slowly turns his head toward me. “I think I may have an idea.”

“Am I gonna like this idea?”

“Probably not, but it’s a great way to clear you both. Tonight.”

My gaze slowly slides back to Sam. It doesn’t look like he was paying the slightest

bit of attention to Ben right then. He stares out the tinted window, his chiseled jaw tensing harder with each second that ticks past. It's obvious he's regretting his choice to save me. I squelch any shreds of remorse. He put himself in the middle of my disaster. I didn't ask him to jump in.

Shifting in the seat, I grit my teeth as the guilt tugs at my brain.

I didn't ask for Sam's help but he gave it because that's the kind of guy he is. And I liked that guy. A lot. I wanted to get to know that guy, even though our timing was grossly off .

He wanted to get to know me, too. He admitted it a few seconds ago.

And that knowledge generates a sudden and inexplicable urge to run my hand down the side of his taut face, to drag the tips over his beard, to run my fingers through his thick, dark waves.

I grab the sides of my head like I have the power to block out the X-rated thoughts now looping through my mind. What the hell is wrong with me? Today was a total shit show — from my visit with Allie and Jules to my dumbass idea of going suicide surfing at Half-Moon Bay. Ever since I read that letter, throughout the entire concert, all I could think about was the fact that my brother's heart is still beating inside of someone else, that a part of him is still alive and not with me, but with fucking Sam Hartley, the guy who got to keep his brother.

A fierce and completely unwarranted hatred ignited when I read his brother's name at the bottom of that letter. Jealousy surged deep inside of me, seeping into all the deep cracks in my heart left by Davis's death.

When Sam cornered me by the restroom after the show, making my mind and my body fly into battle over him, shit just snapped. With my vision flooded with red,

anyone could have been a target. Unfortunately for him, Mr. Clean was the first unlucky son of a bitch to get on my war path.

But at this minute, the hatred simmers, and pure animal lust is gaining power over my mind. It doesn't care about why I'm so focused on despising him. It only cares about the sensations coursing through it, what it would very much like to do to the guy who pulled me out of my dark rabbit hole before I really went completely postal. What happened back at that bar was nothing compared to what might have been if it hadn't been for Sam.

Not that I'd ever admit that to him .

“Okay, we're heading to Mercy Hospital. And we're going to hope and pray that the guy is conscious when we get there.”

An icy hand grabs my heart and squeezes as my mind trips back to the night of the accident.

That's the same hospital where Davis died. Where his beating heart was taken out of his body and put in another.

My throat tightens, a sharp pain shooting down my left arm. Electricity flows into my fingertips, heart hammering hard against my ribcage.

I gulp down air, gripping the seat until my knuckles turn white.

I can't go back there. I can't go through that horrific night again, can't?—

Ben turns to me and Sam. “The press will be camped out there waiting for a status on the guy.”

He and Rex exchange a quick knowing glance. Rex gives his head a slight nod, choking my next thought.

“And so will you...as a newly public couple. Get ready to put on the act of your lives.”

Chapter 11

Sam

“We’re just supposed to walk into the Emergency Room and wait around to see if the guy wakes up or becomes a vegetable?” Brixton scoffs. “That’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I have to agree.” I turn to Rex. “What’s the goal here? Is it just a publicity stunt to show us off together? Because I’m not here for that. The guy could be in bad shape and they won’t tell any of us because we’re not immediate family. If we show up with all those biker guys and something goes south with the ringleader’s health, they won’t let us go while we’re still alive. We’ll be completely blindsided and trapped. Why can’t Brixton just make an announcement apologizing for being such a fucking caveman? And that he’ll cover all the medical expenses?”

“We can’t let this wait. A public apology is necessary, as is financial compensation because in the court of public opinion, Brixton is a walking disaster. But all that has to come after you make amends with the guy you pummeled,” Ben says, his voice tight .

“Amends, my ass. He took the first punch.”

“And it wasn’t at you, dick.” I lift an eyebrow at Brixton. “Remember? By the way, do you even understand that kind of language? Making amends? Do I have to break that down for you since you clearly don’t grasp the concept of remorse?”

Brixton focuses his attention on me, his blue eyes spitting fire, his lips curling into a snarl. “Why should I feel sorry for someone who would have done the exact same thing if I hadn’t gotten to him first? Lane’s no fighter. He would’ve kicked Lane’s ass from here to fucking Timbuktu if I didn’t show up when I did.”

“He was wrong but so were you. You can’t just go around beating the shit out of people because you think you’re being right and just.”

My pulse jumps into my throat under his heated gaze and right now, I can’t tell if he wants to kiss me or choke me. It could go either way.

Not gonna lie, I feel the same way about him at this second.

Brixton leans toward me, his messy, just-fucked hair flopping over his right eye. I take in a breath, letting his cologne fill my lungs and make very bad, very twisted thoughts cycle through my mind.

“If you’re so worried about what the world thinks of me, let’s just stage a breakup so you don’t have to keep me as a noose around your neck.” His words drip with disdain, but the sparks crackling in the air between us are electric with the potential to be soul-searing.

I’ve never felt such a heady mix of disgust and desire for someone in my life. He locks onto me with those deep-set eyes, the ones that women and men alike swoon over when he’s on stage. He leans back against the leather seat, bringing his arms overhead. His muscles tense and rip, full arm sleeves of black ink flexing as he slowly grins.

“I don’t want Sam here to be dragged into my rabbit hole,” Brixton says with a sarcastic edge to his voice. “I can handle this shit on my own after I cut him loose in front of the press camped out at the hospital. I’m better on my own.”

“Fine with me. I don’t have time for your drama.” But the tiny hairs on the back of my neck shoot up as his eyes lick me up and down like he’s a predator in search of a tasty meal.

I shift on the seat, swallowing hard when my skin prickles at the thought of me flipping him face first against a wall and showing him just how deep I want to go into that damn rabbit hole with him.

“You’re not cutting anyone loose,” Rex says to him. “I just got a message from Axel Jones, the publicist for Oakland. He wants a meeting first thing in the morning, and I have to be ready to defend my client’s decision to be with the train wreck that is now Brixton Scott because he’s your only shot at redemption. So you’ll go in there, pretend to be a thing, and make it believable. And just so we’re clear, it’s not a request. Sam’s in this now. Don’t fuck him the way you’ve fucked yourself.”

Jesus, did he have to use those exact words?

The depraved thoughts loop faster.

My phone buzzes, jolting me from my sick fantasies. I tear my eyes away from Brixton and look at the text message from Chase on the screen.

What the hell is happening? Why does the whole world think you’re with Brixton?

Ben slants me a look. “May as well tell him. They’ll all need to be prepped anyway.”

I shoot off a text to him, saying that I’ll explain it all later but that as far as he knows, me and Brixton...

My finger stiffens, almost resisting what I’m about to type.

Gritting my teeth, I stab the letters on the keyboard.

That we were dating in secret and it's just been made public.

This sounds like a story that'll be worth me sleepwalking through my shift tomorrow. I'll be waiting.

"People are going to question you, Sam." Ben's eyebrows knit together, the look on his face grave. "Why a guy like you would get involved with a guy like Brixton, who's had his fair share of bad press over the past couple of years. Rex will have a lot of spinning to do."

"Great," Rex mumbles, running a hand through his hair. "People will think you got hit one too many times on the field, that it knocked the common sense right out of you."

"Looks like I got the upside of the deal." Brixton winks at me.

"You're unbelievable."

He nods. "You'd better fucking believe I am."

"This isn't going to be a cake walk for you, either," Ben snaps. "The tour is ending and you need to show the world that there's a good reason why Sam Hartley would ever want to get into a relationship with you."

"How the hell am I gonna do that?" Brixton sits straight up in the seat.

"You're going to be the newest volunteer at Play It Forward, the sports organization Jase Maxwell and Lucas Bentley formed. Bryce and Sam manage the Oakland location and that's going to be your new home." Ben points between us. "You two

will be inseparable, and Brixton, you're going to channel your inner Mr. fucking Congeniality until all of this dies down."

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. "So I did a good thing, prevented that guy from getting brain damage from this cretin, and now I'm going to be stuck with him for the foreseeable future. How the hell did I draw the short straw in this whole thing?"

"But you love helping people," Brixton cajoles. "Just consider me your newest charity case. That must get you all kinds of excited, trying to reform the hopeless, unredeemable asshole."

"I'd rather gauge out my eyes with hot fire pokers," I grumble.

"There's definitely gonna be a place in heaven for you, choir boy."

I fist my hair. God, I hate him. And I really try hard not to hate anyone. But this guy...fuck my life.

The truck slows and turns into a driveway. Red flashing lights make me squint, even though they're muted through the tinted windows. Crowds of people stand outside the entrance. And as my eyes sweep the outside, I see a lot of motorcycles.

My gut clenches.

I sneak a look at Brixton as he stares out the window.

I hate him, but I still can't help but feel that tug of guilt. Sure, he's been completely antagonistic from the second he ran into me at the bar, but the past two years have to have been hell for him. And finding out that Chase has his brother's heart...that must have been a pummeling blow.

Pulling him away from that bald guy was the least I could do after what he went through and what I gained. But it's pretty damn clear that the universe doesn't agree.

The guy is a real jackass, but he's obviously hurting. His caustic words and nasty commentary are just shielding the devastation buried underneath. The heartbreak must be unbearable. I know it would have destroyed me. So if I have to pretend to be his boyfriend, and sacrifice my reputation as a decent human being as a result, hell, I'll do it.

I have my brother, all because he lost his.

It kills me to say this...but I owe Brixton Scott, and I'm more than ready to pay the debt.

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Chapter 12

Brixton

“ S howtime, guys.” Ben nods toward the door of the truck. “Get out there and do your thing. Security will escort you inside.”

I clench my jaw.

Fucking social media.

I mean, seriously, how many other guys did Mr. Clean beat to shit before karma came back to bite him in his big ass?

And just because I’m somebody, I’ve got to pay that price.

Another Escalade pulls up next to us and two of our security guys hop out. I let out a frustrated breath.

How many more people are gonna be dragged into this? Bad enough I already have a ball and chain shackled to my ankle.

My eyes slide over Sam’s profile and I ball my fingers into a tight fist.

No. Fuck that. I don’t care that he’s the hottest man I’ve ever laid eyes on. He’s practically a priest. Probably never fucked another guy, either.

He's way too good to get dirty .

He jerks his head toward me, a glimmer of a challenge flickering in his dark eyes. Jesus, it's as if he read my thoughts. "Ready, sweetheart? "

I push open the door closest to me and farthest from the mob outside the Emergency Room doors. Our security guys, Mike and Steve, flank me on both sides as my feet hit the pavement. Sam jumps out of the truck after me.

I square my shoulders and walk around the front of the truck when I'm assaulted by bright flashes.

Phones fucking everywhere .

I hate Rex and Ben right now. With a burning passion.

Sweeping my gaze over the crowd, my shoulders relax the slightest bit when I see a few cops among the angry faces. Mike and Steve are more than prepared to handle unruly crowds, and they've had their fair share of deranged fans to deal with, but it's still comforting to know there's a possibility I won't be slaughtered by a biker gang tonight.

Even then, I wouldn't regret what I did...except that it thrust me back to a time and place I'd buried deep in the recesses of my heart and mind.

A strong hand lands on the small of my back. A rush of heat makes my skin tingle. I want to resist, to twist away from him, shake off his hand to show Sam I am more than able to fight my own damn battles.

Instead, I suck in air and let it stay exactly where it is.

Because I need this.

Not only am I about to plunge into my horrific past, but I'm doing it with a target on my back.

I need him .

Goosebumps pebble my skin as his fingers massage the knot lodged at the base of my spine. He can't possibly know it's there but fuck me if it doesn't shrink at his touch almost immediately .

The cops catch sight of us and clear a path for Mike while Steve brings up the rear. A barrage of memories pop between my temples like exploding bullets. I push through the glass revolving door, my nostrils assaulted by the sharp scent of antiseptic cleaner. My eyes drop to the beige tile floor, my toe sliding along a cracked edge, the same edge I stared at for what seemed like hours before I was able to see Davis, two years ago tonight.

A fierce thundering in my chest intensifies as we move toward the group of beefy dudes hunched over in their leather cuts.

Iron Vipers MC.

This is way closer to Sons of Anarchy than I'd like to admit.

My weapon is a microphone.

Theirs?

Let's just say I'd like to leave here before I can find out.

Another pain zings my left arm when I run my finger over the top of a waiting room chair with a torn seam. I stop, my eyes locked on the olive green pleather trim.

Two years ago, it had just been a tiny nick in the fabric. I remember tugging at it while I waited for news about Davis, and how I left a gaping hole in the covering.

Much like the void left in my soul.

A rush of breath expels from my lungs when I sink into the chair. Blood rushes between my ears, my ears ringing so furiously, I almost miss Sam's question.

His voice is muffled, like I'm hearing it underwater.

Sam dips his head low, his lips brushing against my ear. A chill slips down my spine. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head, trying to pull in oxygen but my throat is so damn tight.

"They're coming over here. Get the fuck out of the chair," he hisses .

"You boys come down here to clear your conscience?" A big guy with a septum piercing and a long, scraggly beard stomps his black booted feet across the floor as he heads toward us. "Or are you just plain fucking stupid with a death wish? Because that's what you're gonna get by showing up here. Death. "

I shoot up from the chair, all the fury over losing Davis crashing over me like a monsoon. The water has cleared and I hear each word, clear as fucking day.

"Your pal is lying back there because he picked on the wrong guy," I growl, closing the space between us.

Three other guys, equally large and menacing, slowly walk in our direction. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mike and Steve move closer but I wave them away.

I'm not finished with these assholes yet.

"Maybe he's used to guys who are fucking pussies, but this time, he screwed himself." Pulling myself to my full height, which is a few inches shorter than Beard, I lean in and hiss, "Because I'm no pussy. And I don't give a flying fuck what the hell happens to him."

"Jesus Christ," Sam mutters behind me.

Shock settles into Beard's pissed-off expression and then it morphs into pure ire. "I'm gonna end you, son. So say your fucking prayers."

He reaches for my shirt and I sweep my arm around his, twisting it tight as he lets out a loud groan.

"Where the hell did you guys learn to fight?" I scoff and push him away. Security swoops in, breaking up what was about to erupt. Sam grabs me by the arm and tugs me away.

"You're making this worse for everyone."

I shake off his hand. "Are you worried about yourself, Sammy? Huh? What people will say about you being with someone who doesn't give a damn about consequences? What they'll think about you dating someone who's as unhinged and deranged as I am?"

My sharp laugh swallows the muffled voices around us.

I turn to glare at the bikers, who've now multiplied.

"Don't do it," Sam hisses. "And keep your damn mouth shut. Let's just go to the nurses' station, make it look like you care about more than getting your ass kicked."

My lips pull together in a tight line. Sam gives me a little shove forward and he moves to my other side, blocking me from the pissed-off bikers. Holding me tight against him, he moves me away from the guys and toward the desk.

I twist my head. One guy follows us, his dark eyes spitting hatred as he looks between me and Sam. His face twists with disgust.

A threat of what will happen if the asshole doesn't look away sears the tip of my tongue but before I can spew it, Sam nudges me and I look at the nurses gaping at us. His lips lift into a million-dollar smile and they practically melt into globs of goo even though his arm is wrapped around me.

I guess they're hoping he could be bi.

Tingles dance over my skin where his arms lie, wrapped around my waist.

"We're here about the guy who was brought in," Sam murmurs.

One of the nurses bites down on her lower lip. "We can't give you any information, Mr. Hartley. HIPAA rules."

Sam nods, his smile widening. "How about blinking once if he's going to be okay?"

The nurses exchange a glance between them, and I swallow a laugh.

Jesus, this guy has power if they're even considering doing what he just asked .

“I’m sorry, sir,” one of them finally says. “We really can’t. But the man over there can. It’s his brother.”

I slant a look at the guy she points to and of course, it’s the one who was trying to kill us with his mind only seconds earlier.

Sam leads me away from the desk and I push him away.

“No fucking way I’m asking him anything,” I hiss, stalking past him back toward the exit. “I came, they denied us an update, and now I’m leaving.”

But before another second passes, the brother yanks me by the shirt. I stumble into him, his hot, stank breath making my gut roil.

“How you gonna get out of this one, rock star? You fucking put my brother in the hospital and now you’re gonna pay.”

A sharp tip pokes into my flesh and I tense.

Motherfucker has a knife.

Mike and Steve run toward us, the cops following behind.

One hard jab and I’m screwed.

“You’re not so tough now, are ya?” he says, twisting the tip into my skin. It stings like a bitch but I don’t say a word.

He mistakenly lets go and grabs my hair with his free hand, the stupid fuck. With a hammer fist punch, I nail him right in the nuts. The guy lets me go and hunches over, the knife still pressed into me.

“You little prick.”

“Goddammit,” I yell as he sticks me with the knife. But before he can really dig it in, Sam shoves me out of the way and drives the heel of his hand into the guy’s nose. He falls backward, hitting his head against the wall before crumpling to the ground.

The cops swoop in to grab the guy and cuff him, and one of the nurses runs over to check out my punctured flesh.

“It looks superficial,” she says with a smile. “You might need a few stitches.”

I grit my teeth because it hurts like hell. “Thanks.”

She brings us through the double doors while the cops drag the brother out of the waiting room. The camera flashes are blinding, and that’s saying a lot since I pretty much work under glaring spotlights that are way less offensive.

Once I’m settled on a gurney in a curtained-off area, the nurse leaves for a minute to get supplies.

“You really have a serious issue with showing gratitude, you know that?” Sam says, forcing my hand away from the wound. His eyebrows knit together as he studies it. “I just saved your ass back there. Again. And nothing.”

“Give me a break. I’m the one who junk punched him and if you hadn’t gotten in my way, I’d have cracked his fucking skull in half for stabbing me like that.” I narrow my eyes. “Fuck the consequences.”

Sam rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “How can you say shit like ‘fuck the consequences’? You came here to show remorse and you end up getting into another fight. And you don’t care? Do you realize how much you have to lose, what other people would do

to have your success?”

I grip the sides of the bed, my pulse pumping against my throat. “And my pain? My guilt? My regret?” I shake my head. “No, they wouldn’t want what I have to live with. No amount of success is worth that kind of hell.”

The stress knot in my back flares, shooting down my legs. “I should have told him to stay home that night, to take care of his fiancée and baby. I didn’t. I wanted him there. I needed him there. So now, no matter how much money I make, how many fans I have, how many top ten hits we release...none of it matters. And fuck you for judging me. You don’t know how I feel. You won and I lost. So yeah, fuck the consequences. Because nothing matters when you fail the only person who ever really gave a shit about you.” My chest heaves. “And don’t pretend for a second you care about me beyond what kind of havoc I can wreak on your precious career.”

I tear my eyes away from him because I can’t bear to see my accusation confirmed. Which it most definitely will be because Sam Hartley can’t be that good...no matter how much I may want...or need...him to be.

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Chapter 13

Sam

By the time we walk out of the Emergency Room, the biker convention has broken up. Only a few remain and they all laser us with hateful glares as we pass them. On my way to the restroom a little while ago, I overheard one of the nurses say that the guy Brixton beat to shit has a slight concussion but no other issues. They're keeping him for observation but after that, he'll be good to go.

I'd say Brixton dodged a bullet but he's so broken, I doubt a bullet would have done any worse damage.

We push through the revolving glass doors, the driveway to the Emergency Room clear of ambulances, flashing red lights, and sirens. I twist my head left and right.

No paparazzi, either.

A relieved breath slips from my lips.

Brixton barely spoke a word when the nurse was sewing him up. He didn't want to be numbed, either.

Masochist.

Except he doesn't take joy in the pain, he needs the pain as a reminder of what he thinks he destroyed. It's probably why he takes so many risks and does stupid shit. In

his mind, the repercussions are all punishment for his sins—and he feels that he deserves every ounce of it.

My heart clenches every time I think it could be me in his position, suffering the same heartache.

And that only makes me feel worse because I can clearly remember the hope in his expression that night we were in the chapel together. He was different...lighter, but still sensitive to what I was going through.

So different from the closed-off, rage-filled man standing next to me now.

Brixton pulls out his phone and stabs the screen. I stare at the angles of his chiseled features, his profile glowing in the moonlight. His hair hangs low over his eyes, stubbled jaw tight.

“Where the fuck did they go?” he mutters.

Shoot. That’s right. The Escalades are both gone. I text Chase to see if he’s back at my place. Since he’s barely home with his residency to justify a place of his own, it made more sense for him to crash with me when he’s not at the hospital.

But while I love having my brother around, the last thing I want to do is recount the details for him once I finally get home. Tonight quickly went from a happy celebration to a literal throw down, and all I want to do is put it all behind me for a few hours.

My phone buzzes with a text.

Ben set up a press conference for tomorrow at noon.

My shoulders slump. Yep, a few hours is all I'm gonna get.

Okay .

A second later, my phone pings again.

And you need to show up together. Until this all dies down, you guys are joined at the hip.

I grit my teeth. It's what I signed up for but damn. Brixton's sharp voice cuts into my thoughts.

"What the fuck, Ben? You just left us here? How am I getting back to the hotel?"

He paces the sidewalk, stalking back and forth, his eyes glowing with anger. "What do you mean, I'm not going to the hotel?"

Oh, shit.

A cold sensation snakes around my stomach and squeezes hard.

Brixton looks over at me, his eyes wide. And in that second, my gut plummets into my shoes.

Because I know exactly what Ben is telling him right now.

He's not going to the hotel because he's coming home with me.

"So I'm supposed to fucking live with him now?"

I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

What the hell did I get myself into?

There's a little bit more grumbling before Brixton finally ends the call and looks at me.

"I guess we're gonna be roommates."

"Don't sound so excited," I shoot back. "I have to share my space with you now."

He takes a few steps toward me. The scent of his cologne bites into my air supply, forcing me to take him in. I resist the overwhelming ache to breathe, to let him infuse me.

I was stupid enough to do that once. I'd have to be a complete idiot to do it again.

"I gave you an out. I told you to walk away. "

His invisible grip on me tightens, daring me to push away.

"You know I can't do that. I'm involved now," I rasp.

Brixton's lips curl into a snarl. "Who asked you to jump into the flames, Sammy? Didn't you know you were gonna get burned?"

Disdain drips from his words, but the lust glittering in the depths of those blue eyes tells a very different story.

He's close. So close, I could reach out and trace my fingertip over the curve of his mouth. But touching him would ignite a spark so deep, I think the flames would incinerate us both.

I've never felt such a mixture of disgust and sympathy for one person at the same time. It's like I want to hug him tight for a minute only to throttle him hard in the next.

It's an all-out tug of war with my emotions.

Impossible to win.

"We should call an Uber." I finally break the silence. "You need to get some rest before tomorrow morning. Clear your head."

Exactly what I need to do.

He doesn't respond, only walks to the edge of the curb and sinking onto it, his long legs folded up by his chest.

I pull out my phone and order the car. Then I send a text to Chase.

I'm bringing Brixton home. Make sure you're in your room when we get there.

A second later, my phone pings.

Holy shit. Are you seriously banishing me to my room?

I let out a deep sigh.

Yes .

Because I can't risk him seeing the guy who's got his dead brother's heart beating inside of him.

Brixton is on the edge just knowing who has his heart. If he came face to face with Chase? I don't know what the hell he'd do next. He already looks at me like he wants to kill me. He might actually do it if he's pushed too far.

And that would send him straight over the edge.

Not risking it tonight.

My place is about twenty-five minutes from the hospital. The Uber driver doesn't speak to us. He doesn't even bother to look in the backseat once we slide inside. Brixton sits back and closes his eyes.

I watch him for the entire trip, memorizing every detail of his face and body because I'm clearly a headcase. The guy detests me and his actions make it pretty damn clear, but I can't shake the feeling that something brought us together again tonight.

Maybe it's as simple as me stepping in to stop him from committing manslaughter.

But there's some weird sensation swirling in my gut that tells me all of this happened for a reason.

A few hours ago, though, I thought it might be a very different reason.

One that would be a lot more carnal.

I stroke my beard, watching him toy with the silver rings on his fingers. One on his left hand is a simple band. The two on his right hand have some kind of design or engraving on them. I squint but can't make them out in the darkness.

His fingers clench into balls, knuckles white. My eyes move toward his face in time to see his mouth twitch. His neck is taut, the vein that runs along the side bulges

against his skin.

It's like staring at a rubber band being stretched to the point of snapping .

The car finally rolls up to the curb outside my building. I give Brixton a nudge and his eyes fly open, glassy and hopeful for a split second until they clear with the realization that none of what he experienced tonight was a dream.

He pushes open the door and staggers out to the curb. I slide out after him and dig out my keys to the front door. He follows me inside, wordless, which throws me for a loop because I'm used to him being a caustic prick with his snide comments and toxic commentary.

It's a nice change but also eats at me a little bit.

Maybe he had some kind of epiphany during that car ride that has him thawed out.

We take the elevator to the top floor and I unlock my door. He walks into the foyer then moves into the massive living room with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the lights of the city.

“Too bad they don't pay you more so you can get a real penthouse,” he bites out.

My lips stretch into a tight smile. He is such an insufferable asshole.

Maybe the brother should have dug the knife in a little deeper at the hospital.

I give my head a quick shake. Jesus, now the air around him is poisoning my head, too.

“Thanks for that. I'm actually really comfortable here.”

Brixton paces around then looks at me with a lifted eyebrow. “Sure. It’s nice and cozy and small.”

I shrug. “How much space does a guy need?”

He runs his finger over the black granite countertop. “Bigger is always better. You never got that memo?”

“So we’re talking apartment size...and ego size, yeah?”

With a flash of his eyes, Brixton stalks across the room to where I’m standing. “Is that supposed to be a joke? Because we’re not friends. Now or ever.”

“I have no desire to be friends with you, Brixton. I’d rather stick a hot fire poker in my eye.”

“Good. Just remember, this is an arrangement. And a very fucking temporary one.” His lips lift into a nasty smile. “I’m counting down the days that I have to be stuck with you.”

I shift my weight, the hardwood floor creaking under my feet. “I can’t imagine anyone with any shred of sanity wanting to be around you .”

Brixton squares his shoulders and circles me like a jungle predator. “And you’d put me to sleep with all your do-goodness. I’d taint you, Angel. Stain you so bad, you’d never get clean.”

“Jesus Christ, what a fucking charmer you are.” I push past him, a sharp jolt zapping me as our shoulders collide. I pull open the refrigerator door, grab a bottle of water, and twist off the cap before taking a long sip.

It does nothing to cool the flames climbing in my chest.

“You’ve got a lot of hate in that body,” I say, placing the bottle on the counter. “It must rip you to shreds, the way you use it to tear down everyone who’s around you.”

Shock eclipses his smug expression for a split second. It doesn’t take him long to recover with another rage-filled zinger, though.

“I’d say you should fuck it out of me,” he growls. “But I bet a good boy like you doesn’t fuck, right? I bet your dick wouldn’t know the first thing to do in a hate-fuck situation. Isn’t that right, choir boy?”

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Chapter 14

Brixton

I s he fucking kidding me? Nothing?

Sam just stares at me. He doesn't say a word or make a move. Hell, he might not even be breathing for all I know.

How the hell doesn't he respond to that ?

God, I just want him to show some emotion, to come unglued.

Give me the finger. Punch me. Something.

Anything.

Because this raging fury is all-consuming, and I need to unleash it in some way before it eats me alive.

I grab the bottle off the counter and hurl it at the white wall. Water splashes everywhere. The plastic bottle clatters on the tile floor. My pulse thrums hard, sparks of heat prickling my skin.

"I knew it. You're too much of a fucking saint to even try," I scoff. "Pussy."

I twist away from him and head for a hallway lined with closed doors. The place is a

lot bigger than I thought when we walked in, not that I'd give him the satisfaction of backpedaling.

And fuck him for not even acknowledging me. I'm so done with him, with this whole sham. Right now, my temples are pounding and I need sleep. Since I'm stuck here for the night, I'll just find a bed and crash.

I grit my teeth, my feet pounding against the shiny tile. I try to dig the toe of my boot into the polished ceramic to scuff it up but no luck. It's Brixton-resistant.

Jesus, what a fucking circus. I can't believe that bastard biker actually stabbed me back at the hospital.

Where the hell were the cameras then? Someone makes an attempt on my life, and nobody gives a damn. But I need to do a press conference and make a public apology?

My fucking ass.

I put a hand over the gauze dressing on my side, a twinge of pain making me wince. It's Ben's fault. He's the one who made me go to the hospital. Where the hell was he when we left?

Gone. And he took my damn car with him.

I'm firing him tomorrow.

Scrubbing a hand down the front of my face, I reach for a door handle on the right. My fingers close around the brass and just as I twist it open, a rush of air shoots through my lips. Strong hands grip the back of my shirt and shove me into the darkness.

I flip around as Sam closes and locks the door behind him. A thin stream of light from between the blinds hits his face and my cock jerks.

Right now I'm having a hard time remembering that he's supposed to be the angel in this whole charade.

Then again, the Devil started out as an angel, too.

Before he fell from grace .

Sam slowly moves toward me, his eyes glowing in the dim light, his lips twisted into a grimace like he just tasted shit. My gaze rakes up the length of his muscular body, finally landing on the distaste in his tight expression.

“You don't know anything about me.” His voice is low, the angry vibrations rippling through me. “So don't you fucking come into my house, throw a tantrum like a little bitch, and make comments you can't back up, you self-centered prick.”

He doesn't raise his voice for one single syllable, but it's like he bellowed every word.

The rage inside me is clawing its way out, scraping at my insides as it bubbles to the surface.

Sweat licks at the hairs on the back of my neck, my skin tingling under Sam's hard glare.

“Nice to see you've got a dark side, Sammy boy,” I sneer. “That you're really human underneath that fucking superhero cape.”

He inches closer and I catch a whiff of him. Fuck, he smells good. Not like cologne,

though. It's something else, fresh and clean. And with this new and unexpected twist of badass, it's sexier than fuck and makes my head woozy with need.

"You think you can do and say whatever the fuck you want without consequence," he says, reaching for my shirt. His fingers wrap tight around the fabric and he pulls me close so his good boy smell intoxicates me to the point where my knees wobble.

I want to be a good boy for him...

Whoa. Fuck. Where did that come from?

"Newsflash, I already told you that," I choke out.

"You're gonna learn what happens when you say the wrong thing to people." Sam tightens his grip on me and lowers his head so his lips practically graze mine. "And that consequences matter. "

"Is that a challenge?" I rasp. "Because I don't think you have it in you to teach me a goddamn thing."

His heart beats wildly against mine since we're standing chest to chest. I force my hips against him, his thick, hard cock straining against his jeans.

Fuck. Me.

Sam's hand releases my shirt and moves up toward my neck. He gives it a little squeeze. "I'm tempted to do a hell of a lot more than this."

"So do it." I put my own hand over his, forcing him to tighten his hold. "Show me you can handle me."

He slowly shakes his head. “No. I’m gonna show you that you can’t handle me.”

I grab his belt buckle, my dick practically dripping at his threat. “I think you’re all talk. It’s easy to say shit. Much harder to do it.” My lips lift, my smile a challenge. “And do it well.”

Before I can tug his belt open, a sudden force throws me against a wall. He pulls off his shirt and my mouth waters as my eyes trace the cuts of muscle defining his upper body.

Clear of tattoos, his skin is smooth and tan, and fuck, I want to lick every inch of him.

Sam pulls off my shirt, then runs a hand down the front of my torso, stopping right at the waistband of my jeans. Such a damn tease. I’m about to tell him so when his fingers wind into my hair. He twists them tight and pulls my head back, forcing me to look up. His breath is hot against my face and his lips are close enough for me to bite and suck.

But I can’t.

I won’t.

“Don’t kiss me. There’s nothing intimate about this. Nothing at all,” I say. “I don’t like you.”

“And I can’t fucking stand you,” he mutters.

Then he flips me around so I face plant against the wall. He pulls open my jeans and shoves them to my ankles. I kick them off. I hear a zipper pull and then a drawer open and close.

I almost let out a moan but swallow it back before it hits the air.

It'd sound too desperate.

And it would be very fucking accurate, too, because I need this man buried deep inside of me.

Immediately, if not sooner.

My stomach clenches. The slick head of his cock bobs against my ass. Everything tenses. I reach for my cock and stroke it. Precum gathers at the tip and I spread it down the length of my shaft so that it's slick between my frenzied fingers.

One of Sam's arms snakes around my waist, his other hand, slick with lube, scissors my hole to prep me. My balls ache, the sharp pain climbing into my gut. Just as I'm about to yell at him to fuck me already, he plows into my ass with one hard thrust. The scorching and intense burn makes me shudder, every cell sizzling at his claim on me.

He moves his hand lower and it closes on mine so that we're both jerking my cock. He squeezes my hand like a vise as he fucks me long, hard, and deep. My whole body tenses as he hits my spot, driving against it until I can't hold back the scream that tears through the heavy silence.

His teeth grab onto my ear and then assault my neck, nipping and tugging at my flesh. Holy shit, this guy is a sex god. His fingers rub over the tip of my dick, slicking precum over the slit.

"Beg me to make you come," he hisses. "Tell me how much you need it. And don't fucking lie and say you don't love it."

I slap one hand against the wall for support because I'm pretty damn sure my entire body is about to morph into goo under his delicious assault .

"I need it. Harder," I gasp, driving my hips backward. "Fucking harder. Don't you dare hold back. Make me feel everything."

I clench my teeth, white light exploding behind my eyes, shooting from left to right like laser beams. The orgasm erupts out of me, hot ropes of cum shooting over the sides of our hands. After a few seconds, Sam lets out a low grunt with his final thrust and then collapses against my back.

A few seconds pass before he slips out of me and lets go of my cock. I lean forward, my forehead hitting the wall. My shoulders quake, aftershocks zapping every corner of my insides like a rogue pinball.

That was a fucking bone-melting lay if I ever had one.

I turn around and lean back against the wall, still trying to catch my breath. Jesus, who the hell is this guy who has me turned inside out and upside down?

I've been fucked before.

But what just happened?

Shit, that was a mind bending, otherworldly kind of fucking.

Dark, angry, passionate.

I didn't think Sam had it in him.

And then all of a sudden, it was in me.

Sam picks up his clothes without a word.

He just looks at me like I'm a cockroach shitting up his pristine home.

"I was wrong about you," he says, his voice flat.

"Why? Because you didn't think I'd be the best you've ever had in your life?" I let out a sharp laugh.

But even as I say the words, I know they're total bullshit. A defense mechanism to deflect from my own feelings about what just happened between us, since I'd never admit that he's the first one to have this crazy effect on me. I knew there were sparks between us when we first met, but I had no idea that they'd materialize into such an epically earth-moving fuckfest.

"Hardly." His lips lift into a nasty smirk. "I just think it's ironic that you thought I'd be the one who was all talk."

Then he turns and walks to the door, the moonlight hitting the perfect globes of his ass. I fall back onto the mattress as the door closes behind him.

Because there's no way he wasn't as affected by that as I was.

A smile toys with my lips.

Challenge fucking accepted, dick.

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Chapter 15

Sam

I sit with my back straight against the leather office chair the next day. Late morning sunlight streams into the office through the loosely drawn blinds. It shines onto the top of Max Riley's bald head, giving him an angelic look.

Which is completely ironic considering he's bright red with anger at my role in the shit show otherwise known as last night.

Rex texted me right before I showed up for practice so I knew the ambush was coming. And how considerate of them to let me get in a grueling workout before pouncing on me like a feral cat on a very unlucky mouse.

"Your involvement with Brixton Scott shines a negative light on you as well as the team," Max Riley, the Oakland GM, says. His forehead is pinched with worry, and I get why. He's new to the team, and the last thing he wants are any players who are problem children. Doesn't matter that they may be one of the best tight ends in the league. Perception is the only thing that matters.

And right now, his perception of me isn't great .

"Sir, I understand?—"

Max's eyes narrow. "I don't think you do, Hartley. Any affiliation with that train wreck of a man will reflect poorly on you. Perception becomes reality."

My stomach sinks a little bit when he confirms what I already thought.

That I am completely fucked.

Except the reason goes way beyond just me interceding in a bar fight.

I rake a hand through my hair, which is still damp from my shower. A cold shower because I haven't been able to stop thinking about what happened in my guest room last night. And all that X-rated fantasizing is very inconvenient when you're showering together with a group of guys.

"Look, we realize we can't tell you how to live your life," Coach Taylor says slowly, stroking his chin. "But it doesn't take much for a player's popularity to plummet. We've seen it happen before. And if anything happens to your performance, the fans will be relentless on social media. Remember when Jessica Simpson dated Tony Romo? His game went straight down the crapper and everyone blamed it on Yoko Romo."

I swallow a snort. "My performance has been great. So obviously none of this has had an impact on it."

Forget the fact that we only just officially started "dating" last night.

"We understand Mr. Scott will be holding a press conference at noon to discuss the altercations that took place last night and to make a public apology." Max's lips stretch tight. "I've heard that the man who was beaten is pressing charges."

"Yeah, well in California, it's legal to defend someone other than yourself."

A look of surprise flickers in Max's expression. "I wasn't aware of that."

“Now you are. So there aren’t actually grounds for a lawsuit.” I shrug. “The guy should have thought twice about attacking Brixton’s bandmate. He opened himself up to trouble.”

The tension in the office damn near chokes me. I don’t understand why I’m being such a defensive asshole. Max is my superior. He has a lot of power over my career with the Saints.

My heart thrums as memories from last night pummel me—except it’s not just the sex that has my mind in such a twist.

And believe me, the sex was off the hook and unarguably the hottest I’ve ever had...or even wished to have.

But the asshole rocker grabbed hold of my heart, too. Through his caustic words and insufferable attitude, I got him, loud and clear.

He’s broken. And I feel compelled to help fix him.

So for as much of a thorn in my side Brixton may be, I have to see this through. People may say a lot of shit about me as a result, but I can’t imagine any of it hurting me any more than dealing with such a tragic loss.

“And then you went and opened us all up to the same trouble.”

I can practically see the smoke billowing out of Max’s ears but I can’t help it. There’s something about the guy I can’t stand, and even though he does have some control over me, I know I’m a fan favorite. I bring a lot of money in for the Saints and I haven’t been on the team for that long, either. So I’m gambling on the fact that he’s blowing smoke up my ass with his thinly veiled threats.

“Uh,” Coach Taylor says, holding out a hand as if to tell Max he needs to shut the fuck up now. “Sam, you’re already a leader on this team. You bring lots of great press to us because of all the work you do around the Oakland area. Fans love you, the team loves you. We’re not here to reprimand you. ”

Max lets out a huff but I ignore him and focus on Coach.

“But understand our position, too. If things get resolved with a press conference, great. The guy’s getting out of the hospital, no major damage done. But we all know this is a pattern with Mr. Scott. He’s been a loose cannon over the past couple of years, and we’re just thinking about you. We don’t want you to get dragged into his downward spiral.”

My back stiffens because it’s pretty clear Brixton is headed in that direction and I’m the guy on his arm, along for the tumultuous ride.

“I’ll be fine. And I will make sure that nothing blows back on the team.” I look between them. “Are we finished here?”

Max taps the tip of his pen against the desk, flashing a glare at me. I guess he’s not used to others abruptly ending his meetings for him.

“Sure,” he bites out. “Just keep this all in mind and hope we don’t need to have a follow-up conversation anytime soon. You have the playoffs in sight. Don’t let anything take your focus off of your job, Hartley.”

With a curt nod, I push back the chair. The legs scrape against the tile floor, the screech making my ears ring.

I turn on my heel and walk out of the office. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rex shoot up from his chair. The door to Max’s office closes behind us. Once we’re in the

hallway, Rex pulls me around a corner.

He straightens his tie like he's adjusting a noose to let in oxygen. His dark eyes are clouded with worry, brows knitting together.

"Sam, I know you're the guy who always offers to help people, no matter what. And it's one of the things I love about you, what the world loves about you." He leans closer. "But you don't always need to do it. If it's going to screw up your life and your reputation..."

I glare at Rex. "I gave him my word. Remember?"

"Yeah, and you have a lot to lose if things go south, just like Max and Coach Taylor tried to warn you about. Why aren't you thinking about your future? Is Brixton Scott really worth throwing away everything you've worked so hard for?"

"You're singing a very different tune today. Last night, you were on board with Ben's plans. What changed?"

Rex averts his eyes, his hand once again at the knot around his throat. "I don't know if it's the best idea."

"And is that because it's more than just my reputation on the line? This all because you're afraid of blowback onto you? Because if that's the case?—"

"No, no. That's not it. I'll always back you up." His hand moves to the back of his neck and he paces in the small space in front of me. "I'm just telling you to think long and hard about your future. Your team management is not happy about this, and I don't want them taking it out on you."

I drop my voice. "Nobody can know the truth about what we arranged last night,

okay? It has to look legit to work. Otherwise I'll look like an asshole and he'll look like an even bigger one than he is now. And I'm going to do my part because I said I would. I will be at that press conference today, and I'll make sure he shows up to Play It Forward right afterward to begin rehab of his image."

"Jase and Lucas will be there. I'll make sure they know the deal and to keep this all quiet." He pauses. "You know, the guy is like a runaway train. There's no way this goes smoothly at all."

I square my shoulders, breathing out a deep sigh.

Rex is right. There's absolutely no fucking way this can go smoothly. Especially since I can't stop obsessing about the fake boyfriend I need to hate.

Because if I don't, I may end up just as broken as him.

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Chapter 16

Brixton

I open my eyes a crack then fling an arm over them to keep out the annoying as fuck stream of blinding light. My skin tingles and the corners of my lips creep upward. Damn. Is it possible to still feel aftershocks hours later?

Stretching my arms overhead, I let out a low groan.

Goddammit.

Waking up means I can't keep dreaming about Sam fucking me like a savage last night.

I reach under the sheets to stroke my half-hard cock, imagining it's his hand rubbing me up and down. I settle into the mattress with a deep sigh, still grinning like an idiot.

My mouth isn't used to that kind of movement. I don't do a lot of smiling these days. But Sam shocked the hell out of me last night. He turned my view of him completely inside out. When he pulled me off that guy at the bar, I figured him for a total softie do-gooder. But when he drop kicked that asshole at the hospital in my defense and then brought me back here to violate me in the best fucking way possible, I saw a deeper layer. It's obviously one that he doesn't show too often but somehow, I peeled away enough to get a glimpse.

Okay, more than a glimpse and I am not complaining about that.

Tingles erupt in my groin as I rub harder.

His thick muscles caging me against the wall, strong thighs locked against mine, his massive cock slamming into my ass to stake his claim on me...I want to lie here and let those memories loop through my mind forever.

That possessive streak is sexy as fuck.

I jerk into my hand, thrusting my hips. My breaths are stilted, short and sharp as the sensations course through me like a dose of adrenaline-spiked lust.

Precum seeps from my slit. It coats my fingers as I fuck my hand, my mind short-circuiting from the overload of carnal need consuming me. I squeeze my dick, dragging my hand up and down, eyes shut tight.

My balls tighten and I suck down air as sparks explode from my core. They shoot to the tips of my fingers and toes as the orgasm tears through me.

Holy fuck.

I lie there with my cum-soaked hand wrapped around my cock. I can barely think, the pounding between my temples is that hard.

And to think I could have probably just gotten up and pissed Sam off to the point of fucking me again instead of doing the job myself.

A buzzing sound jolts me from my vision of Sam's lips wrapped tight around my cock. My eyes fly open and with my free hand, I grab my phone off the nightstand.

A text from Ben flashes across the screen.

Press conference will be at the Wallingford Hotel in an hour. I'll send a car to Sam's apartment.

I let out an unsteady breath. Fuck. I forgot about the press conference.

This whole thing is such bullshit. The guy was looking to flex his dick and he picked the wrong audience. Why should that become my problem? Does everyone really think we'll lose fans because I defended my bandmate? Are they gonna suddenly start hating our music? There are plenty of celebrities who've done way worse shit than me and guess what? Nobody's canceled them .

So why the hell are they so goddamned worried?

Scrolling through my notifications, I roll my eyes at the endless string of texts from Lane and the rest of the guys and toss the phone onto the mattress.

I sit up slowly and reach for my t-shirt on the floor. I clean myself up and get out of the bed. My jeans and boxer briefs are on the floor, too. But instead of getting dressed, maybe I should take a stroll around the place to see if I can find Sam.

Let off some steam before I have a sea of cameras stuck in front of my face.

An hour won't give us a lot of time, but judging by the way my cock jerks when Sam's face floats into my mind, I don't think I need much at all.

I walk toward the bedroom door naked when chills spike down my back.

A deep ache assaults my heart when the music hits my ears.

That song.

My mind trips back to a Sunday morning before Davis had moved up north .

The smell of bacon and eggs filling our house, Davis playing Maroon 5 while he cooked, which was part of his whole breakfast ritual. Didn't need to be Sunday morning, either. He played that song every damn day.

I let out a groan as I pad into the kitchen. "Not again with this song."

Davis sings along, ignoring me as he scoops two platefuls of fluffy scrambled eggs out of the pan.

I stab a forkful from the pan mid-transfer and shove them into my mouth.

He flips me off but doesn't stop singing.

"Adam Levine is a total hack," I say before taking a long gulp of orange juice.

"Jesus, are you ever going to let it go? Just because he ignored you after your opening set at their show doesn't mean he's a hack."

"No, but it does mean he's a dick," I grunt.

Davis laughs. "You're still my favorite front man."

I stiffen, my hand frozen on the door handle.

Whoever is singing...isn't Sam.

But who the hell is it?

I grab my jeans and pull them on along with my shoes. Then I stuff my phone into

my back pocket. My eyes fall to my cum-stained t-shirt.

Fuck it.

Then I open the door and creep down the hallway, my shoes squeaking on the tile floor. I stop short when I get to the doorway to the kitchen. I stare into the dark eyes of a guy who looks almost exactly like Sam.

Almost.

Actually, he looks like a dark-haired version of Steve Rogers before he took the super serum in Captain America while Sam's the after-serum version .

My heart hammers so hard, it drowns out Adam Levine's annoying as fuck voice, but I can't even be happy about it.

Because...it's him.

Chase Hartley.

The guy who took my brother's heart.

It has to be him.

I reach for the edge of the counter, my fingertips digging into the granite.

He's got the last living piece of my brother inside of him.

"Holy shit," he says, dropping the piece of toast in his hand. He shoots up from his chair and takes a few steps toward me.

“This is so surreal. Sam didn’t tell me you were staying over last night.”

I just stare into his eyes. Can’t speak. There’s a strange sensation creeping into the air, winding around my limbs. The hairs on the back of my neck spring up as if they’re on high alert.

I’ve never felt him so strongly before.

But it doesn’t bring me comfort.

Only sadness.

And anger.

Chase shoots out his hand. “I, uh, I’m a huge fan. My name’s?”

“I know who you are,” I choke out, edging away from him and toward the front door.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” Chase says, his face lit up by a huge smile. “It’s such an honor to meet you. I know things got a little crazy last night, but just so you know, that guy at the bar was a total asshole. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

A lump forms in my throat, closing it off to oxygen. I grab onto a chair as I move farther away from Chase.

“The whole social media circus is out of control. But don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me. As far as I know, you and my brother are dating.”

Chase pauses and his eyes drop to the floor for a second. Then he sweeps his hand through his hair the same way Sam does. His smile fades, his face eclipsed by remorse.

“I’m so sorry about your brother. He gave me my life back. I tried to reach out a long time ago. I wanted his family to know how thankful I am every day.”

The words stab me like knife blades, slicing into my heart with their serrated edges. I press my fingers against my temples, Chase’s face swimming in front of my eyes. Then Davis’s face appears and they blur together, both talking at me. I grab the sides of my hair, blinking fast.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

Shaking my head, I pull open the door and walk out without a single word. The door slams closed behind me and I collapse with my back against it, my shoulders shaking.

My brother is in that apartment.

And I have to get away from it as fast as I can because I’m damn close to shattering like fucking glass.

I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to Ben to bring my clothes to the hotel. Then I order an Uber for myself, not giving a good goddamn that I am shirtless. By the time I get downstairs, the car is waiting at the curb.

The driver’s eyes widen as I slide into the backseat.

“Just go,” I grumble.

I hang my head, covering my face with my hands.

My pulse hammers against my throat.

Seeing Chase was like pouring alcohol directly onto a raw and bloody wound. The

searing pain that follows is unbearable.

Sam never told me his brother would be at the apartment. He knew how fucked up I was about that letter, how unglued I'd become if I was faced with that loss again. And he left without a warning, that fuckhead.

How ironic that the reason why I woke up with a smile on my face is the same one making me want to throw a fist through this car window.

Saint Sam, my ass.

I was right about him being the fucking Devil.

Except he's not the only one with darkness in him.

And he'd better watch his back.

Beware the pitchfork, dickbag.

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Chapter 17

Sam

I force a smile at the doorman at the Wallingford Hotel as he pulls open the glass door for me.

“I’m a really big fan,” he says in a low voice. “Don’t let all that social media crap rain on your parade. There must be something good about that Brixton Scott if you’re with him.”

Goddammit.

My jaw hurts from trying to keep the smile plastered on my face.

“He’s a good guy,” I reply, my voice strained. “Just going through a hard time right now.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure that hanging around with you is the best medicine.” The doorman grins wider and steps aside so I can pass. I give him a nod and stalk toward the elevators, keeping my head down.

I don’t need any more fans assuring me that I’m not a complete fucking idiot for getting tangled up with Brixton.

Straightening my tie, I spot Rex a few feet away. He’s staring at his phone and shaking his head .

“What has you in such a twist?” I ask, bringing a hand to the stress knot at the base of my skull. It’s going to take a heck of a lot more than a quick massage to relieve the sharp pain shooting down my spine because of it.

“Posts about what happened at the hospital. How it looks like you started with the biker’s brother according to the video clips that’ve been shared.” Rex scrubs a hand down the front of his face. “Jesus Christ, what the hell else?”

“That’s bullshit,” I hiss as the elevator doors open. “The guy came at Brixton with a knife. He had a weapon. Did that show up in any of the videos?”

Rex lifts an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“Has the team management seen those?” I walk into the elevator and collapse against the back wall.

“I’m sure I’ll get a call if they do.” Rex lets out a deep sigh. “I’m going to say it again, Sam. I get that you want to honor your word, but this is not a great plan.”

“I’m already in it, Rex. Already implicated. What the hell am I supposed to do, other than ride it out?” I want to tell him the truth, to explain my intentions but they’re just too private, especially after what happened between me and Brixton last night. He’s a selfish, self-centered asshole, and even though I detest him right now, I still feel like there’s more to him than he lets on. And that’s the guy I want to help.

So I can’t walk away, even though my mind tells me it’s the smartest move I can make.

“You’re too goddamned principled for your own good,” Rex grumbles.

Yep. No argument there.

The elevator doors open on the third floor where all of the conference rooms are located. Photographers line the hallway, waiting to get the first glimpse of whoever shows up first. By the way they clamor for a shot of me, I guess Brixton hasn't made an appearance yet.

Leave it to him to keep the drama level as high as possible.

I keep an easy, relaxed smile on my face, trying to not look like I have a pole shoved up my ass while I make my way toward the conference room door. But everything is stiff and tight, and a strange sense of unease makes my stomach knot.

My cell phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out.

"Hey, Chase, what's up?"

"You didn't tell me Brixton Scott stayed over last night," he says. "He came into the kitchen about an hour ago, shirtless. I think he was looking for you."

"What were you doing at the apartment so late?"

"I was doing some last-minute studying for my practical exam at the hospital."

I clap a hand against my forehead. "Dammit. I forgot that was today. I figured you'd be out long before he woke up. Didn't check to see if you were home before I left for practice."

"Yeah, well, he looked at me like he saw a ghost. He didn't even say anything to me. Just made a beeline for the front door and took off. What the hell was that all about? It's like he couldn't get away from me fast enough."

I clutch the phone hard in my hand.

“I, uh, I don’t know. Maybe he had to get somewhere.”

“Shirtless?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you now?”

I bite the inside of my mouth. “Press conference at the Wallingford. Brixton is going to give a statement about what happened last night.”

Chase pauses. “And you’re there because of the whole fake boyfriend thing?”

Fake boyfriend .

More lies and hidden truths.

Except there was nothing fake about what we did in the guest bedroom last night.

Every moan, every thrust, every tug of his hair.

My skin prickles. I remember every touch. I can still feel him now.

And there is definitely nothing fake about the swirls of lust snaking through my insides right now at the thought of being buried balls deep in his ass.

The elevator doors ding and the paparazzi crowd the doors, waiting for them to open.

“Yeah. I’ve gotta go.” I click to end the call.

When the doors finally part, Ben steps out with the other guys from the band and a

couple of bigger guys...security from last night...follow. Then the camera flashes blind me where I'm standing.

Brixton walks out of the elevator by himself with what looks like an incredibly forced smile on his face. My breath hitches as he strides forward, flanked on all sides by his entourage.

He's not wearing a tie. No shock there. It's his way of telling the crowds that he's not sweating any of the bullshit they're saying about him. He's going to be himself, no fucks given, and nobody will control him.

The black suit hugs his long, lean frame. He's got on a white button down open at the collar. It pops against his tan skin. His sexed-up hair hangs over penetrating ice blue eyes, the only pair of eyes that has the power to unravel me and get me to do things I know are bad for me...but so fucking good at the same time.

Ben guides him in my direction. I can't tear my gaze away from him, and when he finally makes eye contact, everything around me disappears except him. His long strides close the distance between us, and the power he holds over me at this second makes it hard to breathe, impossible to move. I lose myself in those blue pools, so much emotion bubbling in the depths of his heated stare.

He walks right up to me, reaches for the back of my hair, and threads his fingers into it.

With a hammering pulse, I glance at the cameras pointed directly at us then back to Brixton.

He pushes my head toward his so that we're practically lip to lip.

Suddenly, it looks like he's trying to kill me with his mind.

What the hell ? —?

He leans in, his lips brushing against my ear. Goosebumps pebble my skin at his nearness.

Fuck, he smells amazing... why do I have to think he smells amazing?

Every nerve is on high alert, my body damn close to spontaneous combustion right about now with the way his fingers caress the back of my neck. He presses his other hand against my chest where my heart is galloping at a crazy pace.

“Um, this is nice, but there are an awful lot of people watching and filming?—”

“Shut the fuck up,” he seethes. I choke on a breath as the hand in my hair tightens and tugs hard. “You didn’t even warn me, you fucking asshole. You knew what it would do to me and you didn’t say a fucking word. You took off and just left me there to deal with it. You vindictive bastard.”

Shit.

“Brixton, I didn’t know. I swear, it wasn’t my plan at all?—”

“The fuck it wasn’t. You’re pissed that you got dragged into this shit so you wanted to hang me out to dry.”

He takes my earlobe between his teeth and bites down, sending sharp tingles straight to my dick .

God, I hate him. He’s so fucking twisted. How could I have ever thought there was more to this guy?

“You’re crazy. I fucking saved your ass twice last night.”

“And after fucking me once, you decided you needed to do it a second time to really drive shit home. You surprised me, Sammy. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

He pulls my hair again and I grit my teeth.

“Don’t worry, though.” He loosens his grip and moves back the slightest bit, a vicious smirk on his gorgeous, demonic face. “I’m gonna take such a sledgehammer to your precious image that you won’t even recognize what you’re trying to protect.”

Then, before I can even respond, he crushes his lips against mine in a deep and demanding kiss that I feel everywhere.

Fuck my life.

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Chapter 18

Brixton

My smile spreads wider when the anger flickers into Sam's expression.

He doesn't like to be caught off-guard.

And now he's about to find out exactly what he signed up for when he agreed to be my sham of a boyfriend.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he growls under his breath. "Are you trying to turn this into a goddamn circus act?"

"I'm just the puppet." I shrug. "The label execs are pulling all the strings and I doubt they'd want to be part of a circus."

"You'd better not screw this up. It isn't just about you." Sam's brows furrow, his hands wrapped into tight balls at his side, and it's pretty clear what he wants to do with them.

"You wanna deck me? That would be hella fucking juicy, yeah? A lover's spat, caught on video with all the other bullshit they want me to spew."

"You'd love the drama too much. That alone is reason enough for me to do the exact opposite of what you want."

“And I think you’d love it if I kissed you again.” I run my hand over his heart. “Don’t lie to me, either. I can feel your truth, Sammy.”

With a quick glance over my shoulder, his eyes widen and he looks back at me, his lips lifting reluctantly.

“I’d rather have an enema,” he says through his fake ass smile.

I laugh.

Fuck him if he wants to deny he felt anything from that kiss.

Because I sure as hell did. Every thick, hard inch of it.

It takes every ounce of restraint I have to not reach down and rub my hand over it again and again until he screams that I’m right.

But before I can challenge him, Ben and Tyler flank me on both sides and lead me into the conference room. They lock me between them, making sure I have no chance to escape, and march me to the front of the room where there’s a table set up with a microphone.

When I drop into the chair, I catch the glares of my bandmates now sitting in the audience.

Well, two of them.

Lane looks at me like...

I swallow hard and drag my eyes away.

Like he feels sorry for me.

And that pisses me off to no end because I don't need anyone's goddamn pity.

My family is gone. Nobody can ever replace him. And every time I've seen my father since the funeral, that fact haunts the shit out of me.

My own fucking father couldn't give a crap less about me.

His flesh and blood.

All because of a situation I had zero control over.

And it's hung around my neck like a goddamn rotting albatross ever since.

All the success in the world can't give me what I lost.

Loyalty, compassion, love, trust, faith.

Things nobody else on Earth has ever shown me since Davis died.

Maybe nobody thinks I'm worthy of them.

My dad sure as shit doesn't.

I sometimes wonder what my mom would think if she could see the way he treats me, the way he looks right through me.

Any other parent would be here, front and center, for their kid in this situation.

Instead, I have a fake boyfriend in the front row, praying I don't do any more damage

to his life.

Rage gathers force deep inside of me, flowing like magma racing to the crater of a volcano.

He tore open the wounds this morning when he disappeared without a warning.

I flex my ringed fingers.

Prayers won't help you this time.

Ben places a piece of paper on the table in front of me and covers the microphone with his hand. "This is the statement. Don't go off script. Read it and then we can get out of here and put it all behind us."

My eyes drop to the typed-up page. I skim the words and stifle a sharp laugh.

Is he fucking kidding me?

A quick glance at Sam confirms he's shitting a brick right now.

He must know it's about to get real.

Smart fucking cookie.

I avoid looking at Lane. Instead, I stare at Dak and Aiden .

Where the fuck were they last night after we left the bar?

Lane reached out to make sure I was okay.

Did they give a shit enough to ask?

No.

They never fucking once asked me how I was doing after Davis died. It was Lane who showed up at the hospital that night, not them.

All they were worried about was their precious fame and what a damaged and broken front man would do to their careers.

Lane was there for me.

They weren't.

Not for any of it.

Lane is a great musician, the best I know.

Guilt knots my gut.

Unfortunately this time, he's gonna be collateral damage.

Because it's time for the rest of them to pay.

Ben leans down and speaks into the microphone. "Thanks for joining us today. Brixton Scott will be reading his statement. He will not be taking any questions from the audience."

With a quick nod, he backs away and sits between Sam and Tyler in the front row.

I flash a million-dollar smile at the sea of curious faces in front of me. "This feels

really formal to me. I like to connect with my audience, you know?” I push back my chair and stand up, plucking the microphone from the stand. I walk around to the front of the table and sit on the edge. Ben clutches the sides of his chair, his face a million shades of purple right now.

It’s only gonna get worse, buddy. Hold on tight.

He won’t stop me. Stifling me would be bad for business.

So I keep going because they need the truth.

“I’m sure a lot of you had things to say about me on all your blogs and social media platforms last night.” I shake my head in mock disappointment. “But what you don’t know is what really happened at that bar. And I know that because not one account actually got the story right.”

I stand up and pace in front of the desk, holding onto the microphone.

“My record label made me come here today to apologize for my behavior.” I pause. “But let me tell you about that behavior . I defended a close friend, my best friend these days. He was innocent in this whole thing and about to be assaulted by a guy so I stepped in to protect him. The record execs think I was wrong, but the state of California is on my side. By law, I didn’t do anything wrong except help a friend. The guy ended up in the hospital and I went there to settle his medical bill. He should have thought twice about trying to attack a guy for smiling at his girlfriend.”

I grab the piece of paper from the table and wave it in the air. “But that’s not what this statement says. You deserve the truth and it doesn’t state the truth. At all. It makes me the bad guy. And guess what? The real bad guy is the one who started this in the first place. He’s not a victim. He just picked the wrong guy to mess with. That just makes him dumb.”

I crumple the paper into a ball and toss it into a trash can next to the table. It sails through the air and lands cleanly in the can. With a shit-eating grin on my face, I point to Sam.

“And my boyfriend, Sam Hartley, stands by me on everything I just said.” I lean forward with a knowing smile. “I know none of you would ever question his moral compass. So thanks for coming. I feel better knowing we’re all on the same page now.”

There is silence for a hair of a second before mayhem ensues.

I drop the mic on the table and walk out the door without a look back .

I barely make it into the hallway before Mike and Steve are by my side, escorting me to the elevator. That’s when I make the mistake of looking back at the horde of people following me. The paparazzi crowds around, shouting questions and snapping pictures.

My shoulders relax for the first time in a long damn time, and I don’t give a shit about the consequences of my impromptu speech.

It was a long ass climb to get to the top of the world. And when that world shattered, the fall was fucking bone crushing.

It’s nice to feel like I can finally pick myself up again.

And fuck all of the people who want to keep me down in the shit, including my father.

Just before I make it into the elevator, a strong hand grabs my arm and yanks me backward.

I slowly turn, my gut tightening when I see the fury in Lane's dark eyes.

“You backstabbing motherfucker. I was always there for you and you just killed us. You killed everything. ”

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Chapter 19

Sam

Re ex leads me out of the conference room, my mind reeling from everything I just heard.

Why the fuck couldn't Brixton just read the statement? Everything could have been over and done with, wrapped up with a nice fucking bow. I could have walked out of here with a clear conscience, without having to worry about team management taking a sledgehammer to my own career.

But no. He just had to derail the whole goddamn conference and destroy the livelihoods of pretty much the first two rows of spectators, including his own.

I was here to show support and he cut me off at the knees with one lash of his fucking tongue.

A demanding tongue that, not too long ago in the hallway, plundered my mouth with all of the unsaid needs and desires that set my insides aflame after our sexfest last night.

I rake a hand through my hair.

Fucking manipulative asshole.

Goddammit. I'm not thinking about last night anymore. We are so fucking over. I

was weak. Consumed with so much fury I couldn't control.

I won't let him steal that control from me ever again.

Nagging thoughts chew at my gut. I keep coming back to the question of why he sabotaged that conference. Yeah, he was pissed at me for not clueing him in about Chase, but I don't think that's the only thing that unraveled him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dak and Aiden, two of his other bandmates, huddled together in a corner with a few influencers. I didn't meet them last night. They were too busy with their groupies to be bothered with anyone else at the bar.

My throat tightens when I look to the elevators where Brixton and Lane face off. I can't see Lane's face, but his body language tells me volumes. And Brixton's expression...shit. For the first time, I can see something beyond his typical arrogance and self-righteousness.

He actually looks remorseful, like he knows exactly how he just fucked the friend he was trying to protect.

Even from this distance, the regret in his tormented gaze is clear.

What in God's name was he thinking by pulling that stunt? What could he possibly have to gain by pretty much flipping off the label back in that conference room? Why the hell would he outright reject his success and bite the hands that feed him?

"I don't think I really need to say, 'I told you so,' do I?" Rex asks as we rush toward a stairwell ahead of the press, photographers, and influencers. There are already too many people gathered by the elevator and Rex understands the need to get the hell out of here as soon as possible.

Ben and some other guy named Tyler whom Rex introduced me to are glued to their phones in front of us.

I try not to listen to the shocked voices around me .

Questions pelt me like paint balls as we make a beeline for the stairs.

“Sam, how could you think it was okay to put a guy in the hospital?”

“Is that some kind of occupational hazard since you steamroll guys on the football field?”

“You were always the good guy. Why would you want to get dragged down by the infamous bad boy of rock and roll?”

“Is this just some sham relationship to rehabilitate Scott’s image? How much did they pay you to be here today?”

“Are the lies worth choking your own career?”

Oh fucking no, he didn’t just ask me that.

I stop short and twist around to glare at my interrogator. He backs up the slightest bit, like he expects me to take a punch. Rex puts a hand on my arm, his wordless warning to keep my mouth shut and my feet moving.

But let’s face it, Brixton said more than enough for both of us already. A little more exposition can’t hurt.

So I stir the pot because I’m in this now, like it or not.

“Things got out of control last night, yeah. But just so we’re clear, you don’t have the full story. You have little pieces of what people want you to believe and write about, that’s it. In the eyes of the law, Brixton didn’t do anything wrong. He defended his friend, and I stepped in before anyone got seriously hurt. Brixton tried to make amends and instead, he got stabbed by the guy’s brother at the hospital. Nobody shared that, though. Nobody posted about that guy being arrested or Brixton not pressing charges or covering all the medical expenses. Because it would make the bad guys look better, right?”

“Jesus Christ,” Rex mutters next to me.

I ignore him and give my head a shake. “Nobody is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. But for some reason, you want to crucify Brixton for his.” Stepping toward the guy, I can hear a rush of breath as his eyebrows fly upward.

Good.

I’ve got about eight inches on him and I’m shaking with anger.

“Sometimes, people do things without thinking of the consequences because they feel passionate about their motivation. And because Brixton’s a public figure, he’s being targeted. Have you ever made a mistake? Ever said or done the wrong thing and been publicly criticized for it? Ever had it splashed all over social media? No? Consider yourself lucky.”

There are more phones and cameras filming me than I dare to count but that need to protect overtakes my sensibilities.

But fuck it.

I’m not done.

“And for the record, my private life isn’t up for discussion or speculation. My choices, my relationships, my business.”

After a long hard look at the guy, I turn again and stalk toward the stairwell.

“Do you realize how much shit you just stirred up back there?” Rex hisses. “I’m your agent, not your publicist, dammit.”

“Well, then you should probably call Axel,” I grumble, pulling open the door. “I’m sure he’ll have plenty to say.”

“I don’t understand you, Sam. You wanted to honor your word, which I don’t get at all since you don’t even know the guy. And then you show up here and open yourself up to more character debate with what you said, which was caught on about a hundred different videos, by the way.”

He tugs at the sleeve of my jacket. “Goddammit, stop for a second and tell me why. Why are you willingly putting yourself and your career on the chopping block for that guy, of all people? ”

With a shoulder shuddering sigh, I look back at Rex. “Look, there’s a reason why I’m here right now, and it goes beyond my need to stand by my word, okay?”

Rex stares at me expectantly, his arms folded over his chest. “Okay...”

I drop my eyes to the concrete floor and drag the tip of my shoe through a hairline crack. That’s how this whole thing started. A tiny, innocuous crack that opened up like the ground during an earthquake. And now I’m at risk for falling into the abyss.

Fucking fantastic.

“Two years ago, I met Brixton in the chapel at Mercy Hospital, same hospital we were at last night. His brother had been in a car accident but just came out of a successful surgery. Chase was at the hospital that night, too, in heart failure. If he didn’t get a heart, he was going to die within hours.” I lean back against the cold cinderblock wall. “We talked for a little while and parted ways. Later that night, Chase got a heart. Saved his life. I only just found out yesterday that Brixton’s brother died at the hospital. And two years later, last night to be exact, I ran into Brixton outside the men’s room at the bar and he was pissed as hell to see me. He told me that Chase had gotten his brother’s heart. I had no idea about that part. If you ask me, that’s what snapped in him last night, why he went off the deep end.”

“Shit,” Rex breathes, stroking his chin.

“It gets worse. This morning, he woke up at my place after I’d left for practice and Chase was there. I didn’t tell him Chase lives with me. He came face to face with something he’d struggled with for years — and without warning. The guy is in pain. And I feel responsible. That’s why I offered to help. It’s why I jumped in last night. His head isn’t right, and I get the feeling that nobody else gives a damn except Lane Maxwell. ”

“Sam, I’m sorry for everything he’s going through. It sucks to suffer that kind of loss, but are you really going to let guilt chip away at everything you’ve built for yourself? Can’t you just get another volunteering job and deal with your guilt that way?”

My spine stiffens and I push off the wall. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? I try to give back because I’m grateful for what I have. I don’t volunteer out of guilt. I do it because there are people who need help, and I’m fortunate enough to be able to give it. Period. So don’t ever say that shit again.”

Rex recoils, surprise alive in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Sam. I-I didn’t mean anything by it.”

My lips twitch with anger. “A couple of years ago, the tables were turned and I almost lost Chase. I can’t imagine what my life might have become if it was my brother who died. So yeah, I’m sensitive to what he’s going through. Because of his brother, I didn’t lose mine. I feel like I owe him. And I don’t give a damn what you or anyone else has to say about it.”

Rex puts up his hands. “I get it. I understand. I don’t agree, but this is your life, and my job is to make sure you have plenty of money and endorsement deals that pay for your life. I appreciate you telling me the truth.”

“I expect you’ll keep that between us. It’s not for anyone else’s ears, are we clear?”

“Yeah, of course. I appreciate you putting that trust in me.” Rex sighs. “Okay, so we have to be prepared with whatever is going to pop up on social media next, and there will be plenty. I have to get with Axel to come up with a damage control plan.”

“Whatever you need to do.” I walk down to the lobby without saying another word, but there are plenty bouncing across my mind in the form of questions I don’t have answers to .

Questions I’m afraid to ask.

I don’t make eye contact with anyone in the lobby. My focus is on the glass revolving door at the front of the hotel. I walk quickly across the marble tiled floor, the soles of my shoes clicking hard against it. I squint, the lights blinding me on all sides.

My pulse throbs hard against my throat, my legs picking up speed. An overwhelming urge to pummel the shit out of Brixton threatens to take over, battling viciously with the twisted desires that snake through my insides at the memory of his demanding lips, his devilish fingers, and his superhuman control over me.

This is not pity.

It's not guilt.

It's fucking insanity, plain and simple.

"No questions," Rex calls out over the din of voices that follow me out the door.

A blacked-out Ford Expedition is parked out front. Brixton's security guys stand in front of it with menacing looks on their faces, I guess to ward off any nosy ass people who are aching for a look at the broken Sin City front man.

He destroyed everything and just walked away without a second thought.

Blood rushes between my ears, rage and frustration blasting through me like an inferno.

He can't be more than ten minutes ahead of me...wherever the hell he's going.

"Take me to him." I step toward them, my voice tight. "Now. "

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Chapter 20

Brixton

The driver pulls around the back of the hotel where I was booked to stay after the show last night. It's a little bit outside of Oakland and sits on the San Francisco Bay, away from all the shit hanging over me.

Of course, I'm the one who hung the shit there in the first place so I really can't complain about it.

The whole ride here, I've been ignoring calls. Ben, Tyler, Dak, Aiden, and of course, the record execs. Our bread and butter. The money hungry assholes who made me play last night in the same place my life started to crumble and hasn't stopped since, no matter how many hits or gold records we collect.

Fuck all of them.

Hotel security meets me at the back entrance and hustles me into a private elevator to my penthouse suite. Neither one of my escorts says a damn word, which is great because the last thing I want to do is make small talk. I step off the elevator behind them when the doors open on my floor. They stand in the hallway, waiting for my lock to click and the door to open.

Then they're gone, as quietly as they came.

Fuck, this silence is killing my ears.

I pull open the door to my balcony and breathe in the air. Being close to the water is usually the only thing that brings me peace anymore.

I strip out of the suit Ben brought me, grab a beer from the minibar, and collapse on one of the sofas overlooking the soft waves of the Bay. Reclining, I put my feet up on the coffee table and let out a deep sigh.

Whenever my father would be his typical dickhead self while we were growing up, Davis would always hustle me off to the nearest beach to surf. We'd ride the swirling curls for hours until our skin was prune and our throats hurt from laughing and yelling.

It was one good thing about living in LA. We were a stone's throw away from any beach in the area. We didn't surf for the love of the sport, either. It was just a way for us to unwind and reset. Well, for me to unwind and reset.

Davis was the golden boy. He didn't kill my mom, so he had that going for him.

And I think he took me surfing because he felt guilty about me being the family scapegoat and he knew it was the only way to distract me, other than music.

My phone rings again, jolting me. I grit my teeth and grab it off the coffee table where I'd tossed it a few minutes ago, ready to decline whoever the fuck's call.

Except this time, I can't.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second before hitting the Accept button on the video call.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Brix, what the heck is going on with you? How could you have done so much damage to your freaking life in less than twenty-four hours?” The alarm in Allie’s voice makes my chest tight.

She’s one of two people I don’t ever want to disappoint.

And right now, the expression on her face tells me I’m toeing that very fine line.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. “Al, I know the social media crap looks bad but?—”

“But what?” she says in an exasperated voice. “Look, I get that what happened here yesterday wasn’t the ideal way for you to start your last show. I know it was a lot, between your dad and the letter, and I feel horrible that I couldn’t stop any of it.” She puts a hand to her forehead. “Jesus, dude. You went completely off the rails. Beating some guy beyond belief, that shit show of a press conference, you practically biting off a piece of Sam Hartley’s face on camera after you basically outed yourself...”

A chill snakes down my back.

Oooh. Yes. Me, my fake boyfriend, and the kiss that’s burned into my memory forever.

I told him not to kiss me and I ended up doing the very thing I warned him against. I told myself it was all for the cameras, but deep down, my reason was bullshit.

I wanted to taste those lips after all the venom they’d spewed.

Venom that I one-hundred-and-fifty percent deserved.

When I saw him in that suit with his dark hair slicked back, his jaw tight and eyes

spitting fire, I couldn't help myself.

I needed to taste.

And fuck, it was so much more than I was prepared to handle.

I rest my head back against the cushion. "It was bad. I know. I lost it last night. But you didn't see everything, okay? It wasn't just me wreaking havoc all over the damn city, but that's what all those videos want you to believe."

"Are you okay now?" she asks.

Grabbing the bottle, I take a long gulp of the icy cold beer then I slam it down on the glass top table. "No Al, I'm not okay. I am fucking far from okay. That letter fucked with my head so bad, but it wasn't only the letter. It was who the letter was from that twisted my fucking head inside out."

Pausing, I pick at the edge of the label on the bottle. "And because I'd met Chase Hartley's brother the night Davis died."

Allie gives her head a shake. "Wait, Hartley...? And you were with Sam Hartley last night...are you telling me he's Chase's brother?"

"Yeah." My shoulders slump forward. "I met him in the chapel that night. He thought his brother Chase was going to die. And I'd just heard that Davis was gonna be fine. I stopped in the chapel before going up to see you and Jules, you know, to say thanks to God and all that, and we talked for a little while. I obviously didn't pray nearly as hard as I should have because when I left, I got the call about Davis. Never saw Sam again until last night after the show. Seeing him again blew me the fuck away. I snapped, Al. Couldn't handle it. And after Sam jumped in to pull me away from the guy at the bar, all those social media posts started flying around. People got it in their

heads that Sam and I were a thing. Our publicists said we should go with it.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why?

“Because my image is crap and his is gold. Since I need some reputation rehab, he’s gonna be my boyfriend until all this crap dies down.”

“He agreed to that?” Allie lifts an eyebrow. “Why?”

“The guy’s a saint. Classic do-gooder. And since people are questioning him for hanging out with me, he kinda needs to hold on for a little while, too. Prove to everyone how much of a savior he is, on the football field and off.”

I drop my eyes to the beer bottle again.

“What are you not telling me?”

I ball up the pieces of the label in my hand. “I stayed with him last night. Just in case anyone was watching us and to keep up with the sham. Then this morning, the fucking worst thing happened.”

Allie covers her face with her hand. “Do I want to know?”

I raise the bottle to my lips again and down the rest of it like I’m trying to drown the toxic memory of coming face to face with Chase. “I met Chase Hartley. And I was completely unprepared for it. All of the anger came flooding back. The shit with my dad, the band, the label, the goddamn noose around my neck. So that’s why I blew the press conference. I fucked over Lane, bolted away from Hartley...”

“And was his outburst at the press after the conference all part of the fake relationship?”

My brows furrow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well, you might want to check it out online. Mr. Good As Gold had quite a mouthful for one of the influencers.”

“I don’t really want to Google my name right now. I’m sure you understand.” I sit back and scrape my hand down the front of my face, regret nipping at my gut. “And, oh yeah, I need to do community service, too. With my fake boyfriend. More rehab for my reputation.”

“B, fixing your reputation isn’t going to fix your heart. I know that and so do you. I want you to be so successful and to be able to enjoy that success. Davis would be incredibly proud of you. But you’re messing it up more and more every day and unless you get a handle on your emotions, you’ll completely destroy everything you built with the guys. ”

“Fuck the guys. I mean, other than Lane. Those assholes didn’t show up for me once. All they give a shit about is themselves and their bank accounts.”

“People will always disappoint you. But you’re projecting all of your rage on everyone around you and I don’t think you understand the root cause of it.”

A frustrated sigh escapes my lips. “I don’t need a ten-cent therapy session, Doc.”

“You feel abandoned by your father. And after Davis died, there was no one to cushion the blow of that pain. You’re on your own and making sure everyone around you suffers just as much as you are.”

“They deserve it,” I grumble.

“Who deserves it? Aiden? Dak? Okay, fine. They’re self-centered people. The record

execs? They're in business to make money and you're contracted to command it for them. But everyone else? Are they all targets, too? Stop trying to push everyone away. You have so much, why don't you feel like you deserve it?"

"Because I don't!" I jump up from the couch and hurl a throw pillow at the wall. "I fucking don't, Al."

Tears fill her green eyes. "You have to stop blaming yourself. I'm so scared for you, B. You're on this self-destructive road, and I'm scared to death to find out where it leads. You need to pick up the pieces and find a way to move on. We can do it together. And if I ever hear you say your life isn't worth it, then think of the little girl you were with yesterday. Think about how she lights up like a Christmas tree whenever she sees you, how she never stops talking about Unca Bee. She's a precious gift your brother gave to us."

Her voice cracks and she swipes at a tear. "We're all hurting, B. Try to stop shutting everyone out and maybe it will start to hurt a little bit less. Please. "

A hard knock at the door interrupts my thoughts.

"Someone is here," I mutter.

"Just think about what I said," she says. "I love you, B. And so does Jules."

"I love you guys, too. I'll talk to you later."

I click to end the call and toss my phone onto the couch.

It has to be Lane. He's the only one who gives a shit enough to check on me, even after I pulled that stunt at the press conference.

I slowly move toward the door, my chest aching like I just took a lightning round of sucker punches. Peering through the peephole, my breath hitches.

Sam.

Looking hot as fuck with his tie loosened and shirt unbuttoned.

I pull open the door and he eyes me in my boxer briefs. I don't miss the flicker of hunger in his hard gaze.

"How'd you get up here? Only security knows I'm staying here."

"Mike and Steve brought me."

"Why would they do that? I figured I made it pretty clear with my statement at the press conference that I didn't want to be around any of you."

"Such a self-centered bastard," he growls as he steps into the room, eyeing me like I'm dinner. "You singlehandedly steamrolled everyone who wants to help you during that conference. You're really a fucking head case."

The door slams shut behind him.

I cock my head to the side. "What was that? You want me to give you head?"

Sam's eyes flash and he pushes me into a wall, his hand resting over my nipple piercing. A shiver slips down my spine, goosebumps covering my skin .

"I came to tell you that you're fucking with my career. I was there to help you and you blew the whole plan to shit because you're a self-righteous prick." His other hand comes to rest around my neck and he gives it a little squeeze.

My dick immediately gets hard.

“I don’t think you came here to tell me that,” I rasp, closing my hand over his. “I think you came here to punish me, Sammy. So do it. Show me how pissed off you are that I’m fucking up your life. Make me feel how much you hate me. I dare you.”

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Chapter 21

Sam

O h, God. I do hate him.

So fucking much.

But the way my skin tingles under his icy blue-eyed stare, the way my heart rattles against my ribcage when he's in my airspace, and the way the electricity crackling in the air between us ignites fires down deep in my soul...it all makes me think that I'm doing a tightrope dance over a dark, bottomless abyss where hate and lust are in the throes of war.

One wrong move will plunge me into the depths with no hope of a return.

And still, here I am, my mind and body in a perpetual brutal battle.

Fucking him was wrong.

Coming here was stupid.

But I just couldn't stay away.

I'm drawn to the guy like moths to a flame even though everything about him is wrong, dangerous, and detrimental to my future .

But at the same time, everything about him is magnetic, intoxicating, and all-consuming.

Maybe even more so now that he's a complete train wreck, and I don't even want to think about what kind of a headcase that makes me.

I've always been the rock for people in my life, always wanting to give of myself, to help and support, to be the strength when everyone else crumbles. It's who I am.

Maybe it's part of the reason why I went to the press conference today, but it's not why I'm here now.

It's not why I'm fighting the urge to tear off Brixton's boxer briefs and flip him around so I can violate him the way his heated gaze begs me to.

"You shouldn't have come here," he says, his voice tight. "You made your appearance at the hotel. Nobody asked you to do anything more. I didn't..."

His voice breaks off, his thought hanging in the tense air.

"I didn't want you to come here," he finally says.

"Liar," I say, dipping my head and flicking my tongue over his right nipple before teasing his ring. Last night was so quick and hot and dark, I didn't get a chance to take my time with him before losing myself inside of him.

A moan slips from his mouth and his hands find their way around my back, fingers digging into my spine as I taunt his sensitive flesh.

"I'm not one of your charity cases." Brixton's head falls backward against the wall. He thrusts his hips against me, grinding against my cock. "I don't need a sympathy

fuck.”

I lift my head and narrow my eyes at him. “What makes you think I’m here to sympathize with you? You don’t deserve it after what you did.”

Bringing my lips to his neck, I press into him, the friction of our dicks rubbing together awakening every nerve ending in my body. My lips move down the slope of his neck and I bite his flesh. Hard.

So hard, I hope it leaves a mark. I want him to remember this every time he looks at himself in the mirror. I want him to feel the ache and the yearning all over again.

I work my way back up to his parted lips but I don’t kiss him. Instead, I pull away, my breaths wobbly. His eyes fly open as if he can sense the space I just put between us.

“I don’t deserve it,” he whispers. “So if you came here just to tell me that, then leave. I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone.”

“You think you can get away with doing and saying whatever you want because you’re a spoiled, selfish asshole.”

His stubbled jaw tightens as he rips open my belt and pants. He shoves my clothes to the floor and I kick them off along with my shoes.

“You hurt people. You ruin them. And you don’t give a damn about the damage you cause,” I say, my cock throbbing as my gaze trails the length of his lean, tattooed body.

I shove his boxer briefs to his ankles and slide my hands up the sides of his legs, squeezing his ass when they reach those perfect globes.

He shoves my jacket off my shoulders then tears open my shirt with no regard for the buttons. I slide it off and rip the tie off my neck then pull off my socks.

“You don’t know a goddamn thing about me,” he hisses, winding his fingers into the back of my hair and giving it a hard pull that sends sparks of need straight to my groin. “Don’t you dare judge me.”

Bringing one of my hands to his hard cock, I lean in close, my lips practically against his. “I know you want me to fuck you. I know you want me to make you come again.”

“I can find a ready and willing fuck anywhere I want. There’s nothing special about you.” His heart speeds up, racing right along with mine.

I press my chest tight against him, locking him against the wall. He pushes his hips against my hand, his body urging me to rub him. I drag my hand up and down his dick, stroking him hard, making him tremble.

His eyes float closed again as he fucks my hand but I want more.

I need more.

I lower myself and capture his thick cock with my lips. I suck him down until the tip hits the back of my throat, then drag my teeth lightly against the sides as I draw my mouth back. I tease his slit, the tang of precum hitting my tongue and making my own dick drip.

Brixton writhes against the wall, muttering a lot of shit I can’t make out, but all sounds are pretty much muted by the blood rushing between my ears.

He presses his hands against my head, forcing me to take him deeper with every tug

of my lips.

“Fuck you for coming here,” he mumbles. “Fuck you for busting into my goddamn life. I was good without you. You ruined fucking everything.”

I hear the words but my body isn't the least bit affected by any of them. His cock slips from my lips, my fingers slick with his precum. I coat them some more with my tongue before bringing them around to his ass. I slip them inside the tight ring of muscle, hooking them as I drive them deep inside of his heat.

“Fuck,” he moans as I work him open, prepping him for what's about to come. Pun intended. I rise from my knees and grab both of our cocks with my free hand, jerking them hard.

He thinks I ruined everything.

Now I'm going to ruin him .

He glowers at me from narrowed lids.

Dammit, why does this guy have so much power over me?

And why am I so turned on by his disdain and disgust?

Tingles erupt in my core and explode out to every cell, desire coursing through me, drowning out the protests my mind screams out.

All control is lost and the longer I stay, the further away I get from being able to reclaim it.

But fuck me, I can't leave.

I bring my head close to his and drop our cocks because I want to torture us both a little more.

“Don’t kiss me,” he whimpers as my fingers drive deep, stretching him. “You son of a bitch, don’t you dare?—”

I ignore him, crushing my lips against his. Our tongues swirl together, doing a carnal dance dripping with filthy, dirty promise. I devour him, savoring his taste, drinking in his desire. It’s hot, hungry, and intense—the kind of kiss that can melt bones and short-circuit brains.

I pull my fingers from his ass and capture his lower lip with my teeth as I slowly break the kiss that just completely destroyed me for any other man.

He stares at me, his normally tormented eyes now clear.

Open.

Free.

It catches me off-guard for a second, paralyzes me as I get lost in those light blue pools.

He licks his hand and brings it to my cock, squeezing it as he rubs me up and down.

The spell breaks.

I take my cock from him and turn him around. My eyes drop to his ass and I lick my lips, lining myself up with his hole before pressing inside of him .

“Make it hurt. Fuck me like you hate me,” he says. “Because you need to hate me.”

My heart clenches, a lump forming in the back of my throat at his pained request. Those last words were so low, I don't even know if he meant for me to hear them.

But I did.

His muscles clench me. My balls ache with every thrust, slapping against his ass cheeks. I wrap my arms around him, hugging him tight against me as I fuck him with long, hard strokes. He rides my ass, dragging me deeper and deeper until he screams out.

I run my hands over the front of his torso then grip his hips, forcing him to back into me.

“Touch me,” he urges, melting into me.

I nip at his ear and the back of his neck then wrap my fingers around his cock. He thrusts forward and back, tremors rocking him as he clamps down on my dick and pulls me deeper so I keep hitting his spot.

I shudder, my cock throbbing in his tight hole. His ass was made for me to bury myself inside of it.

He stills for a second and then cum spurts from his dick, spilling over my hand. I shake and shudder as my own orgasm tears through me. I let out a sharp yell as it explodes and I fill him with everything I have.

I collapse against him, my knees like Jell-O, unable to drag in a full breath.

Holy shit.

We stand there, silent, arms and legs entwined, until my dick finally slips out of his

ass. His shoulders rise and fall for a few more seconds before he turns around.

I recoil at the anger flickering in his gaze.

His eyes are no longer clear.

They're dark, clouded by rage.

I give my head a quick shake, like I'm imagining it, because how the hell can he look at me like that after what we just did?

"I told you not to kiss me." He wrenches away from me and points to the door. "Get the fuck out of here. Now."

My eyes definitely didn't deceive me.

And I'm not imagining a goddamn thing.

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Chapter 22

Brixton

I told him he shouldn't have come. I warned him to stay away from me.

But he didn't listen.

Always has to be the fucking savior.

When I told him to leave yesterday, the look on his face shredded me. I thought for a second that he might actually deck me.

I definitely deserved it.

But he didn't say a word. Oh, sure, his eyes spewed plenty, but his mouth stayed closed. He got dressed and took off without so much as a look back at me.

When that door slammed closed, it crushed my soul because I hadn't ever felt that connected to another person in my life. And it scared the shit out of me.

I had no choice but to kick him out.

Call it self-preservation or whatever.

I pull the rim of my baseball cap down as far as it can go as I walk out of the hotel. I breathe in the crisp, salty air and walk across the road, my hands stuffed into my

pockets, head down .

Afternoon sunlight breaks through the thick fluffy clouds above. I adjust my sunglasses as I drop onto a bench overlooking the water. I lean back and kick my sneakered feet out in front of me, then hook my heels around a low railing.

I let out a deep sigh and lean forward with my head in my hands.

By all accounts, Sam Hartley is the perfect fucking man. Everything about him screams stability and trustworthiness and loyalty, from his relationships to his family life. He's dated guys seriously and doesn't do flings or random hookups. Close with his parents and brother, focused on philanthropy, paid endorser of fitness and nutrition products that he actually uses, dedicated and hardworking superstar athlete.

So why the hell can't he stay away? Is it because I'm a challenge to him? That I'm broken and he thinks he can fix me?

All of these questions have looped through my mind since he left my room yesterday. And I don't have any answers, just suspicions. I tried to convince myself it was better to sever ties now, before he got bored with his new pet project.

Maybe a couple of years ago, it could have worked between us. I was happy, settled, excited for my next chapter. About to be an uncle and loving it. We had more in common back then and there was that spark...

But that was then.

It was a very different time.

And after everything crumbled, all of my demons exploded out of their cages and have haunted me ever since.

Allie was right. Davis cushioned the blow of my dad emotionally abandoning me.

Yeah, he lived in the same house but he wasn't ever really there.

Not for me.

Davis was my caretaker and that was what I needed. His constant presence helped me rationalize my dad's lack of attention and love. He blunted the pain and the rejection over the years. Once he was yanked from my life, there was nothing left to protect me from the reality. And as if dealing with my asshole father wasn't enough, the betrayal I felt from Aiden and Dak was just one more harsh blow. It felt like I was being rejected all over again, and I bottled it up for two years until I just couldn't hold back anymore. The fact that I felt used as a tool for generating cash by the label didn't help, either.

I was a means to an end for all of them.

But not my dad, though.

He never gave a shit about my fame or money. He outright rejected me in my entirety and didn't want a damn thing from me.

And I know...like I have for a long time...that he's the biggest demon lurking in my past.

He caused me the greatest pain, and everyone else just piled on, making me feel like it was me against the world.

I didn't need that lecture from Allie because I know exactly why I feel the way I do.

The problem is, I have no fucking idea what to do about it.

How do you accept being rejected by your own father for a bullshit reason that you had zero control over? Because that's what any therapist would tell me I need to do in order to move on and have a happy life.

And I just can't do that.

I remember how happy and excited Davis was when he found out Allie was pregnant. I knew he'd be the best father, no matter what. He'd have never rejected his kid in a million years, under any circumstances.

Because how the fuck could anyone reject a child for doing nothing more than being goddamn born?

I grit my teeth and kick the railing .

Getting close to people, letting them in...it makes me weak. And I've spent too much of my life feeling that way. I'm better off on my own, keeping people at arm's length.

They can't hurt me then.

Because I don't think I can handle any more pain and rejection.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and squint at another text from Ben.

Call me. I'm tired of leaving you voicemails.

I lean my head back and stare up at the sky. He's pissed. Hell, everyone's pissed. I really dug myself a deep grave with that press conference. If I'm being honest, it was more than just me going off the rails. Deep down, I guess I created that shitstorm to see who might find their way to me afterward. To see if there was anything real in the pile of crap I left in my wake.

Two people showed up.

Lane and Sam.

Yeah, they both wanted to throttle me. But they still confronted me.

They still cared enough to make the attempt.

I stand up from the bench and walk over to the railing. I lean over as far as I can go, stretching my back out.

Can I ever be fixed?

I don't know. I've suffered too much, there is way too much baggage for anyone to want to bother wading through.

It's safer for me to be on my own, away from anyone who can make me feel like shit.

I've had enough of that over the years.

But I need to find a way to make myself better on my own .

Because wallowing in this emotional dumpster fire isn't cutting it.

I clench my fingers into a tight fist and look back at my phone.

I want to be better. At the very least, I want to be "okay."

So I stab Ben's number into the keypad because acknowledging my agent is probably a good start.

“Ben, listen?—”

“No, you listen, Brixton.”

His voice is strained and I can tell he’s somewhere in public because he’s not yelling even though he wants to be.

“I signed you because you were on your way to becoming a force to be reckoned with. Supreme talent doesn’t come along often and I saw that in you. But since Davis died, you’ve been a fucking disaster, worse every goddamn day.” His voice drops. “I mean, the surfing at Half-Moon Bay? In that water? Are you fucking trying to self-destruct?”

I close my eyes and blow out a breath.

Jesus Christ, people don’t talk to me anymore. They just lecture.

And I can’t blame them.

“No,” I say.

“Well, it sure as hell doesn’t seem that way.” He lets out a frustrated sigh. “I want to help you, but if you don’t start cooperating, I’m done and you’ll be on your own. As it is, I’ve been doing serious damage control since you walked out of that hotel yesterday. You have a chance to do some good at Play It Forward, just like we talked about. I suggest that regardless of whatever the hell happened between you and Sam, that you make your way over there and find a way to give back.”

“Kind of hard since I’m not an athlete. What the heck can I offer those kids?”

“You don’t need to be an athlete. You know football and hockey. I’ve seen you yell

at the television plenty on the tour bus. You can be a sports fan who just wants to help. They have lots of actual coaches there to teach. You're there for a different reason, for support."

Support. That's a first for me.

My phone bleeps with an incoming text and my heart jumps into my throat because I want it to be from Sam.

"I just sent you something," Ben says. "So you can see what I've been dealing with and why you need to pull your head out of your ass."

I pull the phone from my ear, click the link, and pound the top of the railing with my free fist.

Son of a bitch.

Trouble in Paradise or A Publicist Scam?

I don't have to read every word. I get the gist pretty fast. Someone must have tailed Sam to the hotel yesterday because there's a picture of him looking hella pissed off walking out after we fucked.

Now there's speculation that the whole thing was a sham. That, or we just went through a massive break up.

"Get your shit together, Brixton," Ben says, his words coming through loud and clear before I can even raise the phone back to my ear. "You've got a lot to figure out and make up for. I'll handle the label, you handle your goddamn head."

Click.

Great, so now I'm about to be fired by the guy I pay a shit ton of cash to.

I stuff my phone back into my pocket and clutch the sides of my head.

Right now, I'm conducting a runaway train around some pretty fucking dangerous curves. If I don't pull myself together, I'm going to fly off the damn rails and crash.

Fucking hard.

After staring down at the water for a long minute, I pull out my phone again.

Because he's right.

I may only have one more chance to save myself.

"Thanks," I say and push open the door of the Honda Accord. If my Uber driver recognizes me or my name, he doesn't let on. That's fine by me since I'm trying to fly under the radar for as long as I can.

I asked Ben via text about Sam's practice schedule. Turns out, the Oakland Saints practice until late afternoon during most of the week so I have time before Sam shows up to Play It Forward. I'm not ready to face him yet. I just hope Jase and Lucas aren't here.

I don't want to make this about me and the shitshow I'm starring in.

I want to make it about figuring out what the hell my purpose is gonna be.

Looking up at the brick face building, I square my shoulders and walk toward the entrance when I hear a man's angry voice.

A shudder rumbles through me at the familiarity of his tone.

I turn my head to see a big, burly guy hustling a kid along next to him in my direction. The man's face is a twisted mask of frustration and disgust. But it's the kid's face that makes me feel like I've just been punched in the gut .

His eyes are teary but hard. His lip quivers and his hands are balled into tight fists.

He's trying not to cry.

I should just walk inside, but something makes me duck around a nearby column and wait.

"I can't afford to get you music lessons," the guy grumbles. "Jesus, all you do is drain my bank account. These guys will teach you how to throw a football. You want a future? Learn something useful."

The kid just stares at the sidewalk and I realize it's because he doesn't want the guy I assume is his father to see it.

But instead of pulling open the door to go inside, the man just leaves the kid out front.

All by himself.

It's not until the guy stalks around the corner and disappears out of sight that the kid finally lets go. He stands there, covering his face with his hands, slumped against the wall next to the door.

Oh, fuck, do I want to find that guy and knock his teeth down his throat.

I wait a second and adjust my sunglasses before stepping out from behind the column. Taking a few cautious steps toward him, I clear my throat.

He looks up, startled, his eyes popping open wide.

I flash a smile at him. “You heading inside?”

He casts a glance toward the sign hanging over the door and slowly shakes his head. “Don’t know why I should bother. This place isn’t it for me, but my dad wants me to get a football scholarship or something.” His brows furrow and he points to himself. “Me. I mean, I can’t even catch a football. But he’s always on me to do stuff to help at home and he can’t afford a sitter now because he lost his job...” He looks back at me. “So I guess I have to. ”

“So what are you into if it isn’t sports?”

“Music,” he says, light flooding his eyes. I feel like I’m looking into a mirror ten years ago. He has the same glow, the same love that I had.

One I need to get back.

“You play at all?”

“I’ve got a guitar. It’s really old and the strings need to be replaced. My mom bought it for me before she died. She used to play and started to teach me but then she got too sick. I think it makes my dad sad to hear me play, so he found this place to give me something else to do.”

My gut twists. “I’m sorry about your mom. That’s really rough.”

“Yeah,” he says. “She died a couple of years ago. I really miss her.”

His eyes fill up again and shit, the kid looks like he needs a hug so badly.

But you can't just go around hugging kids these days.

So I'm gonna try to do the next best thing.

I pull open the door and wave my hand out. The kid walks inside and looks around at the other kids in huddles. I guess these are all after-school camps for the local kids. Some older guys are working with each group of kids and I let out a relieved breath when I don't see Jase or Lucas.

"Come on, let's get you registered." I smile. "What's your name?"

"It's James," he says softly, alarm creeping into his expression. "But I really don't think...these guys are huge. I can't...I don't know how to?"

I clap a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it," I say, leading him toward a desk in the center of the lobby. He's stiff and clearly panicked but I think I can help.

A surge of something that actually feels good and right rushes over me, and I have the sudden and startling urge to tell Sam about it.

"Hey, I'm here to volunteer," I say to a college-aged girl in an Oakland Saints jersey who's sitting behind the desk. "And this is my friend, James."

She smiles warmly at us. "We're always anxious to have new volunteers and program attendees. Tell me, James. Have you played sports before? Is there any one in particular you're interested in? We have coaches for baseball, soccer, football, and hockey."

He sneaks a look up at me. "Um, not really."

I pull off my sunglasses and the girl's mouth drops open.

"Omigod," she whispers.

James looks back at me and his jaw damn near hits the floor.

"Holy cow," he says. "You're...you're..."

I grin. "Yeah. I'm him."

The girl claps her hands together and jumps out of her chair. "I am such a huge fan. And it's an honor to have you here with us, Mr. Scott. If there's anything we can do to make you comfortable, please let me know."

I shake my head. "I'm not here for my comfort. I'm just here to help." Nodding my head aside, I ask, "Can I talk to you real quick for a second?"

She practically trips over her feet to get to me.

In a low voice, I tell her what I overheard outside. "Lemme work with this kid. I know music's not your thing but I can fix that for him. There's a music store not too far from here. Can you keep an eye on him until I get back?"

"Sure, but...and I don't mean any disrespect, Mr. Scott, but what happens when you leave? He can't keep coming here for lessons. We don't have a music program. This is strictly sports. "

I bring a hand to the back of my head. "I'll worry about that later. Right now, the kid is hurting and this may make him feel closer to his mom. I wanna try to give that to him."

“Ohhh, you are so sweet,” she gushes. “I always knew you were a good guy.”

She obviously hasn’t read any of the tabloid trash about me, though. I try to smile at that but the reality is, I’m questionable at best right now.

But I have a chance to do something good and I’m gonna take it.

“I’ll be back soon,” I say to her before heading back to James.

“Listen, buddy, this girl?—”

“Sofia,” she interjects with a bright smile.

“Sofia is gonna hang with you for a little while. I need to take care of something real quick but I’ll be back soon. Okay?”

He stares at me in awe and nods. “Yes.”

I turn to leave and the kids erupt into cheers when the door opens and Sam walks inside. His face lights up when he sees the hordes of kids surrounding him and gives high fives to them. The door opens again and the kids go nuts for the second time when a tall, muscular guy stops next to Sam.

He’s gorgeous with bright blue eyes, dark blond hair, and one dimple that winks at me when he smiles, as if to say, “Fuck you, Brixton. You missed your chance.”

And that dimple would be right because the guy with Sam is none other than his ex-boyfriend, NHL hockey player Jack Larson, star center for the New York Renegades.

I’d read that they broke up because their schedules were too crazy and long-distance wasn’t working out well for them.

But then I remember seeing another article recently, speculating that Larson might be relocating out West.

I don't know what the hell I was going to do or say to Sam to fix things between us...or if he'd even have listened...but it doesn't seem to matter now.

When Jack slips an arm around Sam's waist and hugs him close, my vision floods with green, my pulse hammering a hole in my throat.

Karma is a real bitch.

I swallow hard, my stomach dropping into my Nikes when Sam's dark eyes tangle with mine.

And it's then that I know that I'm too fucking late.

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Chapter 23

Sam

Jack's arm tightens around me, but I stiffen under Brixton's pained, accusatory stare.

I won't lie.

I like the defeatist look on his face as he stands there, trying not to gape at Jack.

Speaking of faces, I'd have liked to leave my mark on that chiseled face yesterday after he ordered me to leave his hotel room. I wanted to smash that jaw into a thousand bone chips.

But really, what was I expecting?

He made it clear that he didn't want anyone to breach the barbed wire layering his heart and I said fuck it.

I wanted to be the one to break through.

I only ended up smashing face-first into it, the resulting scrapes and scratches feeling like tiny razor blades slicing at my own heart.

Rex sent the pictures of me leaving the hotel but didn't need to repeat his past words because they were already branded into my brain.

I told you so .

Yeah, you fucking did.

And again, I got kicked in the teeth.

Jack just happened to pick that time to call and tell me he was in town to sign contracts with the Oakland Raptors. Asked if I was seeing anyone and if the rumors about Brixton were true.

I told him it was complicated.

He said he wanted to un-complicate things for me.

And here we all are.

Brixton walks toward us, my insides plunging into a deep freeze at the shards of ice shooting from his gaze.

Jack gives me a little nudge. I look up at him and raise my shoulders in the tiniest shrug.

Because I'm just as surprised to see Brixton as he is.

The kids, too.

They watch him approach, open-mouthed until they all erupt in excited yells.

Brixton pauses and flashes a wide smile at the group. "I may be a little out of place here since I'm not an athlete," he says, casting another glance at me. "But I know how to have fun and that's what you do here, right?"

They cheer and I nod to the coaches to come over to the group. “Hey, coaches, can we divide the guys up into groups, please?”

Brixton’s hard gaze doesn’t leave my face. I can feel his anger rippling through me. Beads of sweat pop up along the back of my neck despite the chilled air blasting from the overhead vent.

My fingers tingle with the memory of sliding over his heated skin, of teasing the tip of his cock, of gripping his hips while thrusting deep inside of him.

His smile never wavers as he turns to Jack. “You’re a long way from home. ”

Jack smirks. “Not anymore. But then again, it makes sense you didn’t know. For someone who’s all over the Internet, I’d guess you would steer clear of Google.”

Brixton lets out a sharp, fake laugh. “Yeah. Well, I guess you wouldn’t know much about being all over the Internet since the Renegades have one of the shittiest records in the NHL and Google probably doesn’t even recognize your name.”

Jack’s jaw tenses and he fists my shirt. I put a hand on his chest and glare at Brixton. “That’s enough,” I hiss under my breath so only the three of us can hear. “Remember, we’re supposed to be here for the kids, not a dick measuring contest.”

Jack rubs his hand up and down my back and brushes his lips against my cheek. Then he turns to the groups of kids and says in a booming voice, “Okay, where are my hockey players?”

I follow Brixton’s narrowed eyes as they follow Jack toward the ice skating rink toward the back of the facility.

He turns back to me, his expression sullen. “I thought he was gonna pee on you

next.”

I stalk toward a corner and twist around to face him, practically choking on the cloud of fury surrounding me. “It’s none of your goddamn business what he does to me, Brixton. Or did you smack your head and forget the way you kicked me out of your room and your life yesterday? You gave up the right to say a fucking word about it.”

Brixton pulls off his baseball cap, smooths back his hair, and sticks the cap on again, pulling the brim low.

It’s not typical for him to delay a response, so that tells me he doesn’t have one.

That stings even worse.

Because it tells me he did it out of self-preservation, not because he really doesn’t care about me.

And I hate that I let myself fall into his trap again .

I almost wish he’d say he never gave a shit. It’d be so much easier to hear that than to hear absolutely fucking nothing in response.

He’s jealous of Jack, but more importantly, jealous of Jack and me.

His nasty looks and scathing comments make that clear as a freshly washed window.

But he can’t admit it, not to me and probably not to himself.

And that makes him so much more dangerous than a regular fuckboy.

Fuckboys want sex, nothing more. No emotions, no strings, no commitment. That’s

the deal.

But this chemistry lingering in the air is explosive enough to capture us both in a fireball and incinerate us. At some point within the past twenty-four hours, our fake relationship got very fucking scary real. Something binds us, forcing us to keep coming back to each other, and it's well beyond great sex.

Great, mind-scrambling, bone-melting sex.

Even now, I should walk away, tell him to handle his PR mess on his own.

I can't.

The pull is too strong, even with all of my rage battling against it.

"So you're back together with your ex." It's a statement more than a question, but it lands like a lead brick against my chest. "How's that going to look to your precious fans?"

"Well, they loved us together the first time, so..." My voice trails off and I love the stricken look he shoots back at me.

"I meant since we're supposed to be together," he says through gritted teeth.

"I'm sure you saw the pictures online of me leaving your hotel. Pretty damn convincing. Looks like we're Donesville." I fold my arms over my chest. "People may have things to say for a while but I'm sure our publicists will sweep up all the broken pieces."

He nods stiffly. "Guess so."

“Why did you even come here today?” I ask in a gruff voice. “Did you finally decide to give a shit about your future after you almost destroyed it yesterday?”

My chest tightens at the word future .

Once upon a time, not too long ago, I’d foolishly thought his future might actually entwine with mine.

What a dumbass I was for even giving that thought airtime.

Instead we collided into one devastating crash after another.

At some point, it’s time to put on a damn seat belt to avoid more carnage.

The guarded look is back in force.

“Let’s just say I had a wake-up call or two. Finally figured out what I needed to do.” He shifts in his sneakers and rubs the back of his neck the way I’ve noticed he does when he’s searching for words but can’t seem to find them.

I nod, casting a quick glance over Brixton’s shoulder in time to see Jack eyeing us through the Plexiglass surrounding the ice rink. “Well, don’t be intimidated about the sports thing. They’re excited because it’s you, not because of what you can teach them on a football field or basketball court.”

Brixton clears his throat. “Well, I, ah, ran into this kid outside. His dad dropped him off, seemed like a real douche canoe. The kid’s not into sports. He likes music but his dad can’t afford lessons. Said his mom died when he was younger. She used to play and was teaching him until she got sick.” He toys with the hem of his t-shirt. “Kid thinks his dad takes out a lot of shit on him because his playing reminds him of his dead wife.”

I swallow hard at the dark shadow seeping into his features, almost as if his own words haunt him.

Then he looks up at me with a shrug, his lips lifting the slightest bit.

My heart hammers at the sight.

I'll be a son of a gun.

The first real smile I think I've ever seen on Brixton Scott's face.

"I'm gonna teach him how to play."

Shit. Now my heart is doing goddamn pirouettes.

The guy is worse than manipulative.

He's unknowingly fucking manipulative.

He's toying with my heart strings like I'm a freaking puppet.

All because I was right...there is more to him than just a cocky arrogance and pole-up-his-ass attitude.

"I think that's great," I say slowly. "But how long can you keep that up? You don't live here. You'll have another record, another tour, then one after that?—"

"At this point, who the hell knows? Will there be another record? Another tour?" He sighs. "Or did I dig my own grave this time for real? Time will tell. And I've got lots of it on my hands."

I want to pull him against me, to hold him tight, to breathe in his spicy scent.

And my God, I hate myself for it.

“I’m sure Ben will help you navigate the mess you made.” I force a smile. “Things will work out. People have short memories. You should forget about it, too.”

“Yeah...” he says in a soft voice before he backs away and slides the sunglasses back on his face. “I should. But I don’t know if I can this time. Sometimes trying to forget is useless, even if you know it’s for the best.”

He turns and waves at a kid standing at the front desk with Sofia, a kid I take to be the aspiring musician. Then he walks out the door, his head down as he disappears into the crowd of people suddenly swarming the sidewalk.

I lean back against the column and blow out an unsteady breath.

Fuck me.

For the first time, Brixton and I might actually agree on something.

The end of us.

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Chapter 24

Brixton

I watch James strum the notes on the new guitar I got him last week. Kid actually looks happy, so different from the first day I met him. His eyes are bright, there's a perpetual smile on his face from the second he walks into Play It Forward every day after school.

And I'm always here waiting.

It's weird that a couple of guys like us who haven't got much in the athletic department can find comfort in this place.

I've been surrounded by such thick iron walls since Davis died, and because of this place...and because of Sam, if I'm being honest...I've started to let my guard down.

Almost on instinct, I narrow my eyes at the entrance to the ice rink where Sam and Jack stand, smiling and whispering to each other.

Fuckups. Jesus, the list is so damn long.

Life is all about choices, and I've made some pretty spectacularly bad ones lately.

But I guess this is part of my penance.

Crossing paths with James, I think it's just what I needed .

It's been a long time since I've felt like myself, not the front man I'm paid to be. I can relax. I don't have to be "on" all the time. People aren't watching and judging me. I made some mistakes but nobody is holding them against me. At least, nobody here is. Everyone at the center has troubles and they support each other, sometimes with just a smile or wave.

Makes me feel less alone since I basically fucked over my best friend and bandmates.

Not even Ben wants to deal with me right now.

And Sam...

I tear my eyes away and focus on James again.

He was smart. Went for the safer choice. The one who's not an emotional roller coaster, even though said roller coaster is trying hard to reform himself.

Yes, shitting the bed is an understatement for what I did to my life over the past week.

I'm tired of being a dick who doesn't want to let anyone in. It hurts. And it's fucking lonely. But I've got a long way to go. Lots of fences to mend or whatever the hell they say.

I sit back in the chair with a sigh and take a quick look around after adjusting James's fingers on the strings.

Davis would have loved this place. He did a lot of volunteering with troubled kids when he moved up here. I guess being a lawyer, he needed to balance shit out and find a way to do good while sucking the life out of corporate clients.

Sam reminds me of Davis in that way. The giving of himself, not the sucking.

Although...fuck, that was good.

James finishes the intro to one of our most popular songs and I clap. “We might need to replace Aiden with you soon.”

He beams like a ray of sunshine. “You really think it’s good? I’ve been practicing every day. ”

“It’s fabulous, man. And after only a week?” I lean forward to clap him on the shoulder. “You’re a natural. Keep it up.”

“You’re a great teacher, too.” James adjusts his glasses and stares at the door, the smile fading from his face.

A quick glance over my shoulder confirms his dad is here to pick him up. I force myself to look away before he catches my fiery glare.

How the fuck could he treat his own son?—?

But I stop my mind from screaming out the question because I’ve been asking it for years without any hope for an answer.

Some things are beyond our control and we have to accept what we can’t change.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

James nods, shuffling his feet as he adjusts his backpack. “I was wondering, how long are you going to be here for? I mean, you don’t live around here, right?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m gonna stick around until you learn that whole song, okay?”

I ruffle his hair and grin at him as I hand him the guitar case.

It takes everything in me to not tackle his asshole father and beat him with the case. Clenching and unclenching my fingers, I watch James run toward his dad and his dad barely giving him a look before doing an about-face toward the door.

At least he came inside today.

The past few days he’s just waited outside with that pinched, disgusted look on his face. Christ, I wanna smack that look off so badly.

Just as James and his dad walk out the door, my stomach free-falls into my sneakers.

Chase Hartley, dressed in what looks like hospital scrubs, walks in. He’s like the mayor, waving and calling out to a lot of the kids by name. Even Sofia waves at him like he’s a rock star.

I want to run, but my feet are rooted to the shiny hardwood floor. That same sense of dread from our first meeting washes over me, the air circling my head thick and heavy.

Our eyes meet and Chase lifts his hand in a tentative wave.

No shocker there since I was such a mess the first time we ran into each other.

My heart leaps into my throat, bouncing back and forth against it like a pinball.

He stops a few inches from where I stand staring at him.

Then that million-dollar smile is back.

When he holds out his hand, I take it, managing a smile of my own.

And I swear I feel an eruption of tingles shoot up my arm.

The good kind.

The comforting kind.

I blow out a breath.

I'm okay.

"I'm sorry I took off on you the other day," I blurt out. "I was surprised...and upset...and, yeah, surprised. I'd just found out recently that you got my brother's heart. It was kind of a shock to find out and then see you all within forty-eight hours. I didn't know what to do or say." I let out a nervous laugh. "Not really sure now, either."

"It's all good, man. I'm really glad to meet you. And...I'm sorry."

I give a quick nod, a lump forming in my throat. "Thanks." Clearing my throat, I point at his scrubs. "You in medicine?"

"Yep, I'm a resident in pediatric cardiology at Mercy Hospital."

"Wow, that sounds...I mean, it takes a certain kind of person to do that kind of work."
"

"It is, but a double-edged sword. So incredibly rewarding to bring good news to a kid

and family, but not everyone gets good news. My job is to make them as comfortable and well-taken care of as possible.”

“Sounds like my brother’s heart found the perfect home,” I muse.

“I’m taking good care of it.”

“Hey, Chaser!”

I clench my fists because I recognize that voice.

Chase walks past me and I turn in time to see Jack capture him in a bear hug. “I’ve been back for over a week and this is the first time I get to see you?”

“I live the doctor life now,” Chase says with a chuckle. “All work, no play.”

“It’s great to see you.”

“I took a detour on my way home especially to see you,” Chase says. “Otherwise, who knows when I might run into you?”

“Well, if you’re off tonight, I’ll see you at dinner at your parents’ house.”

And, of course, the asshole doesn’t miss the opportunity to slide his eyes over to me when he says it.

Goddammit, maybe I’d like to beat Jack’s ass with the guitar case.

Too bad James already took it home.

“Chase, it was great to meet you,” I say, backing away with a wave. I got the message

loud and clear. This reunion doesn't include me. "Take care, guys."

Jack flashes a triumphant smirk at me and looks back over his shoulder at Sam, who is jogging over.

I want to stick a flaming fire poker into his fucking dimple.

The smile on Sam's face fades the second he locks eyes with me and I stop moving, paralyzed to the spot .

"Hey," he says hesitantly.

We haven't really talked over the past week. He was at an away game last weekend and has been at practice most of the times I've been here.

Besides, it isn't like I even know what to say to him.

I made choices.

We both did.

Backpedaling isn't an option.

I need to focus on the future, not the shit in the past I can't change.

"Hey. I was just gonna take off?—"

"Yeah, so Chase is going to make it to dinner tonight," Jack interrupts. "Looks like he finally got a night off."

"That's great. My parents are excited to see you," Sam says, his eyes still flickering

over to me.

My phone pings from deep inside of my pocket. I pull it out and wave it in the air. “See you guys.”

I can still hear Jack’s voice reverberating between my fucking ears. Makes me want to tear out his voice box and shove it up his ass.

Swiping up, I frown at the text from Ben on my screen.

The label wants to meet. You, me, and Tyler. Friday.

That’s two days from now. And there’s nothing comforting about the message, either.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

This could be really bad. The nail in my coffin.

A deep sigh slumps my shoulders as I walk toward the door for another night of nothingness. I tried to reach out to Lane a few times over the past week but he hasn’t returned my calls. I tap on the screen to type out a message.

Hey, I’d love to talk.

My finger hovers over the send button when I hear my name. I quickly hit send and look up.

I swivel around, furrowing my brow when I see Sam jog toward me. “Yeah?”

He sweeps a hand through his dark hair, his lips lifting into a small smile. “I heard James is doing really well with you.”

I shrug. “He’s got a lot of talent. That’s not because of me.”

“Yeah, but you’re doing a whole lot more than teaching him guitar. You’re giving him confidence, a reason to be happy and proud of his accomplishments.” He pauses. “I’ve watched you with him. He’s really responsive to everything you say. You’re a great influence on him, whether or not you want to believe it.”

I let out a snort. “Can’t remember the last time someone said that to me.”

Sadness glows in the depths of Sam’s dark gaze. “How are you holding up? Have you spoken to the guys?”

“Nope,” I say in a flip voice. “Tried with Lane but...” I shrug. “I guess he needs more time. I don’t blame him. I’d have written me off, too.”

“You were going through a lot. He’ll come around.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.” I hold up my phone. “In the meantime, I have a meeting with the label on Friday to see if I’ve got a future with Sin City. I guess I’ll just obsess about that tonight while watching Ink Masters reruns.”

Sam puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “They’re business people and you bring in a lot of cash. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I swipe a strand of hair from my eyes. “I made my bed. I’ve gotta sleep in it. ”

Sam nods and then he perks up. “Hey, so we’re doing a family dinner tonight at my parents’ house. Chase is off, which is kinda rare. Why don’t you come along? I mean, Ink Masters is great, but maybe you could use some company.”

“And Jack? He’s okay with me going?”

Sam shrugs. “Not his parents’ house.”

I shake my head. “You really are a do-gooder, aren’t you?”

“It feels better than being an asshole.” He winks at me. “Give me your phone and I’ll put in the address.”

I hand it over and within a few seconds, he gives it back.

“7:00. Bring an appetite.”

Sofia runs over before I can respond. “Brixton, I’m so glad you’re still here. Charlie, one of the basketball coaches, was going to watch the kids at the football game tomorrow night but he tore his ACL during a pickup game.” She sighs and rolls her eyes. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you mind going in his place?”

“Yeah, sure. I can do that.”

Sam gives me the thumbs-up. “Maybe James would want to go, too?” He puts a hand on Sofia’s arm. “Can you give his dad a call?”

She nods. “Definitely. Thank you so much, the kids will be so excited.”

After Sofia goes back to the desk, I laugh. “This is a first. Two people in the span of about two minutes thinking I’m a good enough influence on kids to spend time with them. I feel like I’m in The Twilight Zone or something.”

“Yeah, well, if other people believe it, maybe you’ll start to believe it, too.” Sam backs away. “Hope I’ll see you tonight.”

I watch him walk away and definitely don’t miss the flash of annoyance on Jack’s

face when Sam rejoins them.

And I decide right then and there that, fuck yes, Sam—and Jack—will see me tonight

.

I wiggle my fingers in a taunting wave and Jack rolls his eyes and turns back to Chase.

Screw you, Jack-O. It's on.

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Chapter 25

Sam

“Do you think it was a bad idea for me to invite him here for dinner tonight?” I ask my mother, toying with the water bottle in front of me. Chase, Jack, and my dad are down in the media room watching *Gladiator* on the new plasma screen television, and I volunteered to help in the kitchen. Not that I’m really doing much beyond second-guessing myself.

My heart pumps faster as the seconds tick by.

It’s almost seven o’clock.

Mom is quiet for a minute while she dresses the salad. Then she looks up at me, a thoughtful look on her face.

“One of the things I’ve always loved about you is that when you decide you want something, you go for it. And you don’t stop until you get it.” She wipes her hands on the apron and walks over to me. “That said, while I love that about you, sometimes I worry that it will come back to bite you because what you want isn’t always what you need and what will make you happy.”

She pours herself a glass of wine and takes a sip. “You’ve always been so selfless, always one to provide help and support to whomever needs it. All of the charities you volunteer with, all of the kids you’ve worked with over the years, how strong you were for all of us when Chase was sick. It’s your nature to be a nurturer.”

I sigh and scrub a hand down the front of my face. “So you think this thing with Brixton is just about me trying to fix him?”

She shrugs. “I can’t tell you how you feel. Only you know that. But you obviously believe you have some kind of connection to him because of his brother dying and his heart being donated to Chase. Kind of some weird twist on the whole Florence Nightingale thing. Falling for the guy whose brother ultimately saved your brother. Or maybe it’s guilt that keeps you going back. Guilt that he lost so much and that you got to experience happiness because of it.”

“It’s just really...complicated.”

“Sam, I feel for him. Really, I do. But he comes with a lot of risk, not only to your career and future, but to your heart. I don’t know much about him beyond what I’ve seen since you two have been linked together online, but it’s not one case of bad judgment on his part. The more I read, the more I see that concerns me. Because of you. Because I know you, sweetie. And I don’t want you to get caught up in someone else’s troubles. You can’t fix everyone.”

“I know. But there’s more to him than people realize. The more I get to know him, the more I can see what hides beneath the mask he wants the world to see. I know he’s hurting and maybe he’s projected it in ways that aren’t the best for him, but he could have cut and run after that press conference over a week ago. He didn’t. He came to Play It Forward and has been there every day. He’s in it. And it’s not to improve his image. I believe it’s actually helping him. That tells me I’m right, that he wants to fix himself.”

Mom nods and opens the oven to check on the prime rib. I breathe in the rich scent but my gut is so knotted, I can’t even think about eating it.

“What about Jack?”

I lean back on the stool and sneak a look at the clock in the hallway.

Six fifty-four.

“You ended things because the distance was too much. But now he’s back. And from the looks of it, he wants more than friendship from you.” Mom shuts the oven and gives me a pointed look. “You were great together. Everyone loves him. He’s a stable, good-hearted guy. Hell of a hockey player.”

“We haven’t talked about getting back together. I mean, yeah, I get his signals, but right now it’s platonic. Neither one of us is making any moves.”

“Because you’re drawn to Brixton.”

“No, because I’m just not sure how I feel right now.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself of that, but I think you know exactly what you want.” Mom takes another sip of her wine. “You know, I just want you to be happy. That’s all I want for both of my boys. But I’d be remiss if I didn’t tell you that this time, you might be making the wrong choice.”

The sound of heavy footsteps gets louder as the guys come upstairs from the basement. Jack beams at Mom when he walks into the kitchen.

“Smells amazing in here.”

Mom gives him a wink. “I hope you’re hungry. I made all your favorites.”

He gives her a quick hug. “You were always so good to me.”

The doorbell rings at the second I take a gulp of water. I cough and sputter. My foot

slips from the rung of the stool as I scramble to stand.

Jack gives me a long look. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. All good.” I run a hand through my hair and walk to the front door.

Silence falls around me and I’m sure it’s because my family is busy exchanging looks behind me.

I grab the handle and pull it open.

Speechless.

I can’t do anything except stare.

He’s fucking gorgeous, looking like a GQ model standing in my parents’ doorway.

His dark hair is slicked back, face clean-shaven. He’s got on a light-blue, long-sleeved dress shirt buttoned up high enough to cover his tattoos. The color makes his eyes look even brighter than normal. His shirt is tucked into black pants, and he’s got on dress shoes. I melt a little just looking at him.

“Umm...hi,” he finally says with a smile when I don’t speak.

I swallow hard. “Sorry, I, um...you look really great,” I blurt out.

“Thanks. I wasn’t sure how dressed up I should get.”

“You’re perfect.” The words tumble from my lips before I can catch them.

“Sometimes,” he says lightly. “Not always.” Then he holds out two huge shopping

bags. “I wasn’t sure what to bring, so I figured dessert was a safe bet.”

My gaze falls to the logo on the bags and my jaw drops.

Crumble and Whisk.

“That’s my?—”

He grins wider. “I know. Now are you gonna invite me in or are we eating on the stoop?”

I step aside and wave him into the house. Chase is the first one to the door. He doesn’t bother to hold out a hand, just captures Brixton in a bro hug.

And fuck me, Brixton relaxes right into it.

My parents greet him with wide smiles that hold a lot of reserve only I can see. But they’re gracious and welcoming, as always.

Jack narrows his eyes at the bags of dessert. “Sam’s pre-game ritual is eating cheesecake the night before a game.”

Brixton looks at him, a smile lifting his lips. “Yeah, I know. I bit the bullet and googled. Amazing what you can find online, right?”

Jack stiffens and grabs one of the bags before turning to bring it into the kitchen.

I take the other bag and follow while my parents and Chase make small talk with Brixton.

“It was a nice gesture,” I murmur to Jack. “And you love their desserts, too.”

Jack leans toward me. “I don’t trust the guy. You did him a favor and he screwed you over. He can’t make up for it with cheesecake.”

“No...” I shrug. “But it’s a good start, right?”

Jack rolls his eyes. “Think about all the shit he put you through. You tried to help him how many times? He doesn’t care about anyone but himself. Don’t you see that?”

“I see a guy who doesn’t have anyone. You know how important family is to me. It bothers me that he thinks he’s on his own. He shouldn’t have to be.”

Jack pulls away and grits his teeth. “Jesus, Sam,” he says, his voice low. “He did it to himself. He single-handedly destroyed his career during that press conference. He alienated everyone in his life because he’s a pompous, cocky prick. How is that your problem to solve?”

I drag my fingertip along the smooth marble countertop, tracing one of the lines of gray to the edge. “You know, at a lot of the organizations I’ve volunteered at, the people are victims of circumstance. Maybe that’s the case with Brixton, too. I don’t know a lot about his childhood or his family, but he’s clearly going through something and doesn’t know how to process it. So he’s acting out.”

“Acting out. What is he, ten?” Jack scoffs.

“I have a feeling it goes beyond losing his brother.” I look at Jack. “And he’s making an effort. That tells me there’s more to him than the pompous, cocky prick you think you see.”

Jack inches toward me and rests his hands on my arms. “I care about you, Sam. I always have. This guy’s motives are questionable, and I don’t want you to get taken advantage of.”

My mind trips back to my visit to his hotel room.

I can't forget it...any of it.

Even though I know I probably should try like hell to.

Every look, every touch, every kiss loops through my mind, sparking very dangerous emotions, emotions I can't seem to bury no matter how much they threaten to crush my heart.

I force a smile. "I appreciate you looking out for me and for caring so much. But I promise, this is only about me being the friend he needs. It's just dinner," I say, lying like a freaking rug.

Because the second I opened that door and saw Brixton standing there, I knew in my heart that tonight with him here is so much more than just dinner .

And I want to devour every course.

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Chapter 26

Brixton

I don't know how much more of this trip down Memory Lane I can take.

Sam's parents have been nice enough, but fucking Jack hasn't stopped talking about all the fun times they all had together for Christ only knows how many years he and Sam were together.

This goes way beyond pissing on him.

And I wanna punch that smug-ass grin right off his face.

"So, Brixton," Sam's dad, Bill, asks. "You play the guitar, right? As well as sing?"

I shift in the dining room chair. Finally, a commercial break in the fucking Jack Larsen show.

"Yes, sir. I've been playing since I was ten. My brother..." I trail off for a second when my words catch. I clear my throat. "My older brother bought me a secondhand guitar and I pretty much taught myself by watching videos online. It was expensive to get lessons, so if I wanted to play I needed to figure it out for my self."

I sneak a look at Sam, my heart clenching at the sadness in his gaze.

"That's incredibly impressive," his mom, Mande, says, a surprised look on her face.

“And look what you’ve become, all on your own.”

Jack chooses that minute to cough through a scoff. Sam shoots him a look.

I clench my fists under the table.

He’d look really good with a hockey stick coming out of his mouth. Fucking dick.

“Davis...my brother...he’s really the one who helped me get noticed. Once we had a band, he sent demos all over the place for us to be considered for gigs. He talked to club managers, called booking agents.” I smile. “He was relentless. I think people booked us just so he’d stop bugging them.”

“He must’ve been very proud of you,” Sam’s mom says in a soft voice.

“Yeah, he was my best friend. He raised me since my mom died when I was born. I don’t know how I would have gotten by without him.”

I snap my lips closed before anything else can tumble out, noticing Sam’s parents exchange a concerned glance.

Shit. I’ve never let anything like that slip out in front of strangers. It’s too weak, too vulnerable. I don’t show that side to anyone.

A pang in my heart reminds me that one person in this room has already seen it.

Sam.

Nobody around the table says a word.

I catch Chase’s eye and he nods at me.

Like he knows Davis is listening right now. Like he's here for me because I need him.

My chest tightens and I push back my chair, the feet scraping against the floor. "Um, excuse me, I need to use the bathroom."

Chase jumps up. "I'll show him where it is."

I drop my napkin on the chair, avoiding everyone's eyes as I follow Chase.

Once we're out of earshot of the dining room, I reach for his arm.

"I appreciate you saving me."

He turns, his lips lifting. "It's the least I can do."

I lean against the wall in the hallway, a deep sigh making my whole body sag. "I'm not used to talking about him."

"I get it," Chase says. "It was a tragedy. You heal in your own time. Don't ever feel like you aren't doing it fast enough."

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. "I think about that night all the time, all the things I did and said, things I didn't do or say. It all loops through my head constantly. Could I have saved him somehow? If I'd have just gotten a different driver, gone a different way to the hospital, tried to go to a different hospital..."

"This isn't on your shoulders. It was his time," Chase says, settling against the wall across from me. "I know that's hard to hear, but there isn't anything you could have done about it. Blaming yourself won't ever make you feel better about losing Davis. But it will make you miss out on things that can bring you happiness. That may make

you feel guilty, too. It's not. It's life. You're not a bad person, so stop letting that guilt and anger turn you into someone you're not."

"I don't know how to get back to the place where I'm even okay."

"Time. It will happen. Maybe you've even had little slivers of okay. That's a good start. You just have to be open to it."

"I need to do something good for people. Davis used to volunteer a lot, but I never did. Always too busy working on my music. But he made the time and helped a lot of people. He loved doing it, too. I never got it before but now...working down at the center, seeing all those kids, knowing there are so many more out there who have it rough, I feel like I'm doing some good there. And I don't...I don't feel so alone."

"Giving of yourself is definitely a way to heal your heart. You're good with the kids from what Sam tells me. They seem to respond to you. And with your musical connection, you could really bring some cheer to kids who need it. I know that a lot of my patients get down a lot about their illnesses. Just meeting you would brighten so many of their days. Music is great therapy." He shrugs. "There's lots of good you can do. Just open your eyes to it."

"I'd love to visit the kids and sing to them," I say, actually excited about the possibility. "Even bring the rest of the band. Maybe even work with my record label to see if other artists in the area would want to make surprise visits."

"See.. that's what I'm talking about." Chase leans forward and places his hand on my shoulder. "You're a good guy. You haven't shown that side lately, but I could tell. I'm a great judge of character. And you're a good egg with an awesome idea. I'm here for it."

He walks back toward the dining room and a smile lifts my lips.

This would be about me honoring Davis, not lamenting his death.

I feel like I've been loitering on the corner of Self-Pity Street and Guilt Place for two years. and I'm finally ready to make a turn.

My heart leaps in my chest.

And there's only one person I want to tell.

Chase's words echo in my mind.

"It was his time. "

Maybe I was meant to be in that chapel that night, meant to collide with Sam in that bar, meant to meet Chase. If I hadn't been in that chapel, the outcome would have been the same except I wouldn't have met Sam.

Maybe the universe was laying the groundwork for my heart to finally heal.

And that, shockingly, brings me a little sliver of peace.

I push off the wall and turn in the direction of the dining room when Jack steps directly in my path.

"If you think that a little cheesecake is going to make Sam's parents accept you, you're wrong."

I roll my eyes. "I didn't bring it for them. And I'm not looking for anyone's approval. I was trying to do a nice thing."

"By googling his pregame ritual? Give me a break. He may not see it, but I do." Jack

leans closer. “And I don’t like it.”

“Why? Because maybe he didn’t miss your dick as much as you missed his?”

The vein in Jack’s neck throbs at that. “You don’t know anything about our relationship.”

“You obviously weren’t doing it for Sam, or else you guys would be back together.” I flash a nasty smile. “Or maybe there wouldn’t have been a breakup at all. Maybe it was just really convenient that you moved out East. Sam’s a good guy. He wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

I’m poking the bear but I really don’t give a damn right now. I’m so flooded with anger that I can’t keep my mouth shut.

I should push past him and go back to the dining room.

But my feet stay planted on the floor.

“You’re right. Sam is a good guy. That’s why you’re here right now. He feels bad for you. And he wants to thank you for helping out at Play It Forward.” Jack narrows his eyes. “So if you’re stupid enough to think there’s more to it than that, then you really are an ignorant prick. I’ve read all the stories. Sam would never be into a guy like you. It’s pity, period.”

“Okay. And you know what I’ve read about you?” I say, dropping my voice conspiratorially and leaning close.

He just stares at me. Expectantly.

I make an “o” with my fingers. “Nothing. Abso-fucking-lutely nothing, Jack. My

advice? Stop trying to convince yourself how important you are to Sam. If he's not in your arms already, he never will be. So stop pissing all over him. It won't change how he feels about you. Find a puckboy."

I edge past him, my feet creaking on the hardwood floorboards.

The blood ices in my veins at the sound of voices drifting into the hallway..

"The guy clearly has a lot of issues. And I'm concerned about Sam's future. I think he should stay far away from Brixton Scott, or else there will be major risks to his future."

I back away, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling at the distaste in his father's tone.

Swinging around an end table, I almost knock over a picture frame as I try to figure out how the hell to get out of this house without being noticed.

"Hey, there you are."

I stop short, Sam's voice like a soothing balm to my bruised ears.

No. Fuck, no.

I always said Sam was too good.

This can't be about me and how he makes me feel.

It isn't fair to him. To any of them, really.

"I can't wait to dig into dessert," he says, holding up the cheesecake. "If you haven't

tried one of their cheesecakes, you haven't lived. ”

I have to make the right choice now. I have to think about him, not what he does for me.

“I have to go,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

He furrows his brows. “Right now? Before dessert? Are you feeling okay?”

I shake my head. “It was a mistake to come here tonight. Everything about us is a big fucking mistake.”

The words taste like shit on my tongue but they need to be said.

And now I just need to turn around and let go.

Let him go.

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Chapter 27

Sam

“ O kay, guys, Arizona has some weakness in their defensive line, so if we keep our focus on the field, we’ll be good as gold today.” Coach Taylor points to me. “Hartley, make sure they stay away from Baxter. Nobody gets through that line, got it?”

I nod, half-listening to the plays Coach scribbles on the whiteboard while we’re in our pre-game meeting. The eggs I shoveled in this morning churn in my stomach. But as my mind trips back to what happened at my parents’ house last night, I know it’s not the stress of the game that has me in knots.

It’s Brixton.

He couldn’t get out of the house fast enough last night, leaving me with some cryptic words and that pained look on his face. It wasn’t until I confronted my parents that I realized what drove him away.

Fucking trash talking the guy when he’s only a few feet away. What the hell were they thinking? I love my parents but they don’t know when to back off and let me live my own life. They cling tight because of what they almost lost but enough is enough. And of course, above all else, they’re Team Jack. Always have been. Nobody else has a shot against him in their eyes.

I bring a hand to the back of my head and massage my stiff neck. I tossed and turned all night, tormented by Brixton’s deflated expression and hating the fact that I was

partly responsible for causing him more pain.

Yeah, he's made mistakes but who the hell on this planet is perfect?

Something Chase said while we were getting dessert ready keeps chewing on my brain.

"He's trying to heal himself. I don't know why he's trying to do it on his own. Maybe he doesn't have a supportive family like we do. But he's trying. He's a good person who wants to do good for others."

It's exactly what I see in him, too. Especially after all the time he's spent at Play It Forward with James. He's excited to be there, happy to help, and always ready to pitch in.

Just like tonight.

I know he'll be in the stands with the kids even though it's probably the last place he wants to be. Jack will be at the game with my parents and I'm sure Brixton knows it.

The thought of him being made to feel less than really pisses me off. That familiar protective instinct flares up in my chest. I can't stand the thought of him hurting any more than he already has. And it kills me that I opened him up to it.

"All right," Coach says and claps his hands. "Let's get 'em."

The guys jump up, pumped for the game since we're so far ahead in our division. The playoffs are within reach and the win is ours tonight. We just need to take it.

I walk over to my locker and finish suiting up. Bryce stops next to me.

“I hear Jack has been spending a lot of time at Play It Forward. Anything I should know? Is there trouble in rocker paradise? Is the fake relationship over?”

I roll my eyes. “Come on, you know it was a publicity stunt. It was never gonna be a long-term thing.”

“Especially not after the press conference.” Bryce shakes his head. “Talk about digging your own grave and then jumping right into it.”

“He’s going to be fine,” I say stiffly, slamming my locker shut.

Bryce wraps his right wrist. “Why do you even care? You’re off the hook now, right? He goes off the deep end, you guys part ways. It’s a win-win, yeah?”

The eggs rumble in my stomach again.

“Yeah. Big win,” I mumble.

“The guys in the band are pissed,” Bryce says, lowering his voice. “Between us, they’re looking to replace him.”

My eyebrows fly up. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Bryce holds up his hands. “Hey, don’t kill the messenger. It’s not final, but that’s what I heard from Jase.”

Lane is their cousin.

Shit.

And after last night...

I scrub a hand down the front of my face, my pulse nearly punching a hole in my throat.

“I know you wanted to help him,” Bryce says, paying a hand on my shoulder. “But some people are just beyond help. You can’t save everyone, Sammy.”

I walk toward the tunnel for kickoff, my feet heavier and heavier with each step. Feels like I’m wearing cement blocks instead of cleats. The game starts after the coin toss and instead of looking at the field, my eyes scour the stands near the box where the kids normally sit for home games .

“Hartley, look alive out there,” Coach yells from the sidelines.

The first few plays are rough. Arizona’s offense is giving us a hard fucking time today and now it’s fourth down. We group together in the huddle. I sneak a look up at the stands while Bryce is calling the play. He nudges me.

“You got this or what? We’re gonna go for it.”

I nod, not having heard a damn thing he said. “Yeah, yeah, let’s do it.”

We get into position. Austin hikes the ball to Bryce, who jogs a few steps backward. I’m ready to bolt forward for a run play when Bryce fakes a handoff to Baxter, the running back.

Shit.

I’m too late.

One of the Arizona defensive ends drives through the gap and tackles me to the ground.

The whistle blows.

And my fucking knee is on fire.

Bryce runs over to me and gets down on his knee. “What the fuck was that? You knew the play. How the hell could you let that asshole pummel you like that?”

I sit up and stagger to my feet, wincing when I start walking toward the sidelines.

Coach Taylor rips me a new asshole as soon as I’m in earshot.

I pull off my helmet after the verbal lashing and sink onto the bench, trying to ignore the searing pain shooting down my leg.

Goddammit. That was a royal fuckup on my part.

The team doc, Rich Abrams, helps me into the training room and tapes up my leg.

“That could have been a whole lot worse,” he says, adjusting his glasses. “It’s not like you to snooze on a play. You feeling okay?”

Since being sick with guilt and regret probably doesn’t qualify as an answer to the doc’s question, I nod my head.

“My bad. It won’t happen again.”

“Good. Because a tear will ruin the rest of your season.” Rich smiles. “And we need you for the Super Bowl.”

I force my lips upward. “Right.” I hobble back to the sidelines and watch the next play go right down the shitter. Arizona scores and Coach Taylor turns so red, I’m a

little afraid his head is gonna spontaneously combust.

We get the ball back. I jog onto the field and get into position.

“Knee alright?” Bryce says.

“Yeah. It’s good.”

“Okay, guys we’re gonna run Eagle 26 Swing,” Bryce says. “Scat, scat.”

We nod and break, getting into formation with two receivers, me, and two running backs. We’re running a screen pass, which means my ass better work hard to keep the wall in place so Baxter can hustle that ball into the end zone.

Bryce gets the ball and passes to Baxter. I’m protecting the line of scrimmage, keeping my eyes on one of the Arizona defensive linemen. I rush him, twisting my leg and stumbling into one of their linebackers as the lineman slips past and tackles Baxter behind the line of scrimmage.

I crumple to the turf, my leg in flames. Clutching my knee, I roll over, teeth clenched in agony. I crack open my eyes under the stadium lights, flashes of color blurring my vision. Coach Taylor runs onto the field with one of the EMTs and Dr. Abrams. I hear them murmuring to themselves and I don’t like it .

“What is it?” I gasp once we’re back through the tunnel and in the exam room.

“It might be a tear, but we won’t know for sure unless we get an MRI.” Dr. Abrams exchanges a look with Coach Taylor.

“What does that mean for the rest of the season? Can I still play?” I clutch the sides of the table to pull myself up.

“If it’s a tear, you’ll need surgery. We can’t say until we get to the hospital.”

I collapse backward and fling an arm over my face. “Fuck. I can’t miss the rest of the season.”

“You need to take care of yourself,” Coach says. “Nobody is making any decisions right now. We’ll make the arrangements and get you to the hospital.”

“My family...” I start to say then trail off.

Coach pats me on the arm. “I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.” They leave me alone with my thoughts, the only sound is the air intermittently blasting through the vent overhead.

I lie still as a corpse because it’s the only way to control the brutally vicious pain assaulting my lower body. Cracking every one of my knuckles does nothing to calm me. I blow out short, sharp gasps, wishing to God the doc had shot me up with something to numb my brain.

Fuck, that pain is a vicious bitch.

Someone knocks on the door. My shoulders relax. Finally, someone is getting me the hell out of here?—

“Hey.”

My eyes fly open. “How did you get back here?”

Brixton walks into the team room. “Security let me past. I guess they know about us,” he says in a joking voice.

“I want to laugh but it hurts too fucking much,” I rasp. “Where are the kids?”

“Sofia was able to come after all. She’s got them right now.” He takes a few steps toward me, his eyes dark with concern. “What did they say?”

I shake my head. “Nothing yet. I need an MRI to rule out a tear.”

“Shit,” he mutters. “Sounds like it hurts.”

“It’s torture,” I whisper.

He moves closer still and runs his hand down my arm where it hangs off the table. “I needed to make sure you were okay.”

“I will be,” I say.

“Good.” His eyebrows knit together. “I shouldn’t have run out last night. It wasn’t right to leave you like that.”

I lift my arm and take his hand. Lacing my fingers with his, I tug him close. “You didn’t deserve any of that. I’m sorry I put you in that position.”

He stares at our hands like he’s mesmerized by the connection.

“There are reasons why I don’t open up to people, why I shut everyone out. But you...you won’t let me. You keep banging on that wall, trying to break it down.” A hint of a smile lifts his lips. “You’re the first person I want to tell when something good happens. I haven’t had that in a long time.” He chuckles. “Haven’t had a bunch of good stuff to share, either, but that’s another story.”

“If I’m laid up for a while, I’ll have time to listen,” I say.

He squeezes my hand and then the door slams open again. I choke on a breath and Brixton jumps backward, startled.

Jack and my parents run into the room, barely acknowledging Brixton. He backs away, a sad glimmer in his gaze as he watches them hover around me.

I know they're worried but all I want to do is scream at them to get away from me. Because all I want right now is the guy loitering by the door. I want him next to me, his hand wrapped in mine, his eyes locked on me, glimmering with whatever crazy emotions have bubbled up between us over the past week.

I want his hunger, his passion, his fire, his desire.

I want everything.

For those few fleeting minutes when we were alone, the pain wasn't as horrible.

Not nearly as horrible as the thought of him walking out of my life forever.

But the realization hits me like a lead weight to the chest.

I never really did have him. For as much as he wants to open up, he just can't.

And I don't think that will ever change, no matter how badly I want it to.

"Don't worry, babe. You're going to be fine," Jack says, running a hand through my hair. "I'll stay with you and make sure you have everything you need."

But instead of his words comforting me, they wrench my gut.

And when I twist my head toward the now-empty doorway, a piece of my heart

shatters in my chest.

Chapter 28

Brixton

I manage a smile when James finishes playing one of his favorite Sin City song, Invisible Connection . When I wrote it after Davis died, I was angry. Devastated. And the lyrics reflect my thoughts on the evil in the connections between people who are just dark clouds over you, keeping you down when you're trying to pick yourself up after a fall.

Now that I really listen to the words, I realize that it was actually a cry for help. That I did crave that lost connection and felt suspicious of everyone around me who tried to ease into my life, that they didn't really want to connect, they wanted something else from me.

Fame, influence, money.

Anything other than what I really needed.

I've felt that way for two years.

It took that long for me to recognize someone doing something selfless to help me, not because he needed anything in return, but because he is just genuinely a good person.

And now the song makes my heart clench, not only because of what it meant to me but because it might mean the same thing to James. He's a good kid who deserves to

have good people around him, people who appreciate him and his talent, who want to support him, who need to understand that if they fuck things up now, it'll damage him for the future.

I've learned this harsh lesson recently, and while I might not be able to fix myself, maybe I can help fix something else.

I rub my temples, but it doesn't do much to ease the ache, not in my head and definitely not in my heart.

"Last night was so much fun," James says, packing his guitar into the case. "I'd never been to a football game before."

"I'm glad you had a good time, kid." I grin at him and sit back in the chair.

"Do you think Sam's going to be okay?" He frowns at me and adjusts his glasses. "I mean, he got taken out of the game. That's bad, right?"

After Jack and his parents showed up in the team exam room, I backed off, not wanting to get in the way. Jack made it very clear that he'd be staying with Sam and there was nothing in the press about his injury. I do know from Bryce he was released, though. Turns out it was just a really bad sprain, not a tear, which I'm sure made everyone let out a huge sigh of relief. And while I want to see him more than anything, I won't interfere. If Jack is what he wants, and Christ knows, the guy is stable as a fucking rock, then I walk. Sam needs that. Deserves it.

Me, on the other hand?

Yeah, I'm about as stable as a tropical storm.

And everyone knows it.

“I think he’ll be okay in a few weeks to play again. There wasn’t any serious damage to his knee.”

“That’s good. I was reading up on his past seasons and how he’s become one of the best tight ends in the league. And now that Oakland is headed for the playoffs, they need him. ”

I grin. “So you are into sports, after all.”

James shrugs and looks over at the group of kids running plays down one of the gym floors to our left. “I never really had anyone talk to me about sports. Not like my dad watches with me. He usually goes to the bar and drinks his face off instead. Then he comes home and lays into me for my music.” He pauses, a wistful look on his face. “I’d really like to learn more. Maybe play.”

“You’re in the right place, bud. Why don’t you go hang out with those guys for a little while? I’ll keep an eye out for your dad.”

His eyes light up and he runs off to the gym. He stays back from the group at first, watching the plays, his eyes traveling up and down the length of the gym. But then one of the coaches pulls him in, bends his head down to say something, and points to a few of the guys. James nods, his forehead creased with concentration.

I settle back in the chair and glance at my watch.

My meeting with the label is in less than an hour.

Drumming my fingertips on the arm of the chair, I let my mind wander back to Sam and the last words I spoke to him last night. I can’t shake the sensations that bubble up deep inside of me when I remember his fingers squeezing mine.

He didn't want to let go, even though everyone knew he should.

Part of me wished he didn't.

The other part of me is grateful he did.

Because what the hell can I really offer the guy?

I narrow my eyes as a familiar figure walks toward the glass door. James's dad. Anger immediately replaces all of the other emotions I've been battling. His head is down and he's peering at his phone. It's rare that he comes inside to get James. He usually just loiters outside, like he can't be bothered to talk to the people spending time with his kid.

I shoot up out of the chair and stalk toward the door, furious at how he's abandoned his kid.

Allie would say I'm projecting and she may be right.

This dipshit has the chance to make things better between him and his son. Maybe he's not interested, maybe he's just too heartbroken to get past the trauma.

But either way, he needs to know the damage he's doing and that the effects will be the forever kind if he doesn't fix shit now, when he has the chance.

When his son needs him the most.

I shove the glass door open and walk out onto the sidewalk. "You're James's dad, yeah?"

He looks up, surprised. Then recognition flickers in his eyes. "Uh, yeah. And

you're?—”

I shake my head. “Doesn’t matter who I am. I came out to let you know that I’ve worked with him every day, teaching him guitar because that’s what gets him excited. What makes him happy.” I clench my fists. “What makes him feel closer to his mom.”

The guy’s face drains of all color. Then, after a few seconds, his eyes darken and his lips twist like he wants to punch me.

Get in fucking line, dick.

“I didn’t know that. I didn’t bring him here to work on music shit. I did it so he could learn how to play a sport. How he can find a way to connect with kids his own age and not hole himself up in his room every day and night. He needs friends. A life.”

“No.” I’m practically seething now, heat rising in my chest like a spurt of magma ready to spew from my lips. “He needs his father. He told me about losing his mom, how you’ve written him off and shut him out. He’s hurting, too. And as his dad, it’s your job to help him pick up the pieces.”

The guy bristles and pulls himself up to his full height, puffing out his chest. “I don’t care that you’re a famous rock star. Don’t you dare tell me how to handle my family matters. You don’t know what we’ve been through.”

I nod. “You’re right. I don’t. My mom died when I was born, so I never knew her. Can’t imagine how much pain James is in, dealing with that loss. But I know how it feels to be cut out by your dad, the one who’s supposed to take care of you no matter what. It fucking sucks. And it makes you question your worth because if your father doesn’t want to be bothered with you, why would anyone else?”

The guy's jaw drops. He doesn't speak, just stares at me.

"James is a great kid. He's a talented kid. And if you spent some time with him, you'd see it, too. Ask yourself this question. How would your wife feel if she knew how much James was hurting and that you weren't doing your job as his dad to help?"

A long pause follows. "I...I...it's too much," he finally says, his voice cracking. "If I stay away, I can hold it together. I can't be his rock. Every time I hear him play her guitar, I near crumble. I know I'm letting him down. Her, too. But I just don't know how to handle it. She was...everything."

"You still have a hell of a lot. Help each other. Give him the support he needs. Let him do that for you." I step back, the cool afternoon breeze prickling my skin. "He's in one of the gyms right now running football plays. You should go in there and watch. I bet he'd like it."

The guy slowly nods and looks past me into the building. He bites down on his lower lip, takes a deep breath, and his lips slowly lift.

"Thanks. "

Then he disappears inside.

I square my shoulders and head for my rental.

Looks like I can be a do-gooder, too.

I lean forward onto the steering wheel, a deep sigh shuddering my chest.

I bet Sam would be proud.

“We’re here to talk about the future of Sin City.” Anthony Reece, one of the executives at the label, glowers at me. “You’ve put the band, as well as the label, in a very poor light as a result of your recent actions.”

“Yes, I know that.”

Ben sits next to me, tapping his pen against his leg the way he always does when he’s anxious. Tyler is here, too, since he works for the label.

Anthony thumbs through some papers on his desk. “I have a pile of printed articles from the past week commenting on your mental and emotional stability, your insolence, your violent tendencies, and your public displays of affection with Sam Hartley. You’ve been offensive and have blatantly ignored simple instructions for how to handle the situations you’ve single-handedly created.”

“It’s true,” I say. “I’ve been all those things.”

Anthony steeples his fingers and leans forward. “At least we’re all on the same page. Now, the big question is, what are we going to do about it?”

“Anthony, I understand the trouble that’s been caused but Brixton has been working hard to reverse the public opinion,” Ben pipes in. “He’s been working at Play It Forward, an organization that provides after-school sports activities for disadvantaged and troubled kids. He’s made an impact with the team there. He’s chosen to stay here in Oakland to spend time with the kids and give of himself.”

“I didn’t invite any lawyers to this meeting. If you have a question, then ask it,” Anthony says gruffly.

Ben nods. “Okay. Isn’t it fair that he gets another chance? Especially when he’s trying to fix the situation?”

Anthony turns his glare back on me. “You blasted your bandmates. They want to replace you.”

“Even Lane?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Tyler hangs his head and I don’t even need to hear Anthony’s response to know he’s in the same camp as Dak and Aiden.

I swallow hard. Truth be told, it hurts more to know that my oldest friend wants to trade me than me losing my front man status.

“Look, I understand if they want to move forward without me. I screwed them over because my head was a mess. It’s clearer now. And no matter what happens, I want to keep giving back because it feels good.”

I wiggle my toes in my sneakers. They’re gonna love it or hate it but either way, I’m doing it.

“I’ve got an idea. What if I worked with the label to schedule appearances by artists in the area who’d visit the local hospitals? I have a...friend who works at Mercy and he says that the kids in the pediatric cardiology floor would love musical visits. It wouldn’t be like a scheduled concert, just surprise visits to brighten kids’ days when they’re struggling to smile.” I look from Tyler to Anthony and then Ben.

They all look at me like I have a dick growing out of my forehead.

Anthony speaks first. “You came up with that?”

“Yeah. The other night,” I say. “I know there are things we need to talk about, security details, crowd control in case word got out. But it’s all manageable and for a great cause.” I shift in my chair. “Okay, you guys have to say something. Does the

idea suck? Because if you don't like it, fine. I'll just do it myself. I just thought it would be a good reflection on the label, too."

After another long minute passes, I continue, "Okay, so I guess I'll take that as a?—"

Anthony waves his hand in front of me. "No, no, no. It is most definitely a yes. I think there are certainly challenges we need to address but overall..." He grins. "Great idea."

"And just so you know, I'm not doing it to win you guys over. This is something I feel strongly about. Something that can help the kids cope with their diagnoses." I shrug. "And if the guys decide to kick me out, then I'll perform as a solo act."

Tyler chuckles. Even Ben cracks a smile, and he'd pretty much been holding his breath, waiting for Anthony to speak.

We go through logistics. I figure I should be the first to deliver my own private concert. Be the trailblazer. Anthony said he'll talk to the managers of his other bands to see who'd be interested. The meeting ends and everyone is excited.

I realize then that the label is giving me another chance.

But that doesn't mean my family will welcome me back with open arms.

Maybe Dak and Aiden kept their distance because it had been a long time since we acted like family.

That's on me.

And now that I know how to fix my image, maybe I can fix my band.

We walk into the hallway. The weight I'd been carrying around for so long actually feels a little bit lighter even though I'm so far from fixing everything in my life.

Ben and Tyler pull out their phones and start walking toward the elevator, but I just take a minute and wander over to the set of windows overlooking the San Francisco Bay. I can't smell the salty air, but I take a deep breath, the same sense of peace and tranquility washing over me.

The hairs on the back of my neck spring up, and somehow, some way, I know Davis is close.

And smiling.

"So I heard you didn't get fired."

I jump and twist around. "Lane, what are you doing here? I figured you'd gone back to LA."

He folds his arms over his Black Sabbath t-shirt, his stubbled jaw tight. "And let other people decide the future of Sin City? Are you fucking nuts?"

"Well, from what I heard, you already decided." I smirk. "Right?"

Lane drops his arms and sticks his hands into his jeans pockets, pacing back and forth in front of the windows. "Dak and Aiden are pissed. And they have a right to be."

"You're not?" I run one finger down the front of the clear glass.

"I'm fucking livid with you, bro. Mainly because that's how I think of you—like my brother—and to know you don't feel the same way hurts."

I lean my head against the glass. “I fucked up so badly. I said shit I didn’t mean. I did shit that was bad for the band. Bad for our friendship. I’m a mess and I know it. But I’m trying to make myself better. And I need my family for support.”

“You always had us,” Lane says, his brows knitted together. “Especially me. But you pushed away so hard for so long. The guys felt like you were rejecting their help. And I felt like I was losing my brother. You can’t apologize in one breath and just hope it all gets better. It takes work, man.”

“I don’t expect it to be that easy,” I say.

“Oh, trust me. There’s gonna be a lot of work for you to do. A lot of groveling drinks to buy. A new drum set. Maybe even a new car.” Lane grins and holds out his hand.

I pull him in for a hug and clap him hard on the back.

“I’m sorry. And not just because I don’t want you guys to kick my ass to the curb.”

He chuckles. “Aiden and Dak will be harder sells than me. They’re gonna want a lot more out of you, too. This whole meltdown two years in the making is gonna be hella expensive for you.”

“Fuck, it’s only money. I just want my family back.”

Lane nods, his smile fading. “Is that all you want, B?”

I shrug and look back at the Bay.

“Because I heard from Bryce that Jack was all over Sam at the hospital and has been by his side nonstop.”

“They have a history. And if Jack has anything to say about it, they’ll have a future, too,” I say through the lump lodged in my throat.

“But what if that’s not what Sam wants?”

I turn to look at Lane. “It’s what he needs. Everyone knows it. Jack’s the safer choice for him.”

“I think you’re wrong. I think Jack is clinging hard because he’s scared of losing.” He steps closer, a knowing glimmer in his eyes. “Scared that what Sam really wants isn’t him but... you. ”

Chapter 29

Sam

“What the hell are you doing driving that truck?”

I twist my neck since my body doesn't move so fast, especially when I'm on crutches.

Brixton grins and it's so disarming that one of the crutches slips out from under me. I grab for it but it crashes to the ground before I can get to it.

“Don't even try it,” Brixton calls out as he jogs over. He bends to pick it up and hands it to me. “Why didn't you get Jack to take you?”

I want to tell him the truth, that Jack is smothering the shit out of me and that he won't leave my damn side unless I lock myself in the bathroom.

But I know I'm lucky. He's a great guy. He wants a future with me. He gets me.

Yeah, I'm lucky.

Seems like I've been saying that to myself a lot lately.

“He had hockey practice and I just needed to get out of my apartment. Feeling like the walls are closing in on me, you know?”

He nods, a chill licking the back of my neck when his ice blue eyes sweep over the length of my body.

“It’s good to see you. Been a minute.”

I nod. “Yeah. Long week. Sofia calls me every day to check in, says all the kids miss having me around. I figured I’d stop by and say hi.” I nod at him. “How about you? Been busy?”

Brixton spins his keys around his finger. “Can’t complain. The label isn’t gonna fire me. And I think I can do damage control with the band to make sure they don’t kick my ass out.”

“Couldn’t blame them if they did.” I wink at him. “You’re kind of a pain in the ass.”

“Damn. That’s the best you can do?” Brixton chuckles. “I’m disappointed. I figured you’d have a lot more colorful shit to say about me.”

We laugh and then a weird silence falls over us.

“So, um,” I say. “Are you coming or going?”

“Going,” he says, pointing to a black truck parked a few up from mine. “Headed to my sister-in-law Allie’s house to see her and my niece, Julianna.”

“Oh.” I feel my shoulders slump because I don’t want him to go. He’s one of the main reasons why I’m here. I needed to see him, needed to torture myself a little bit even though I know there’s no future for us. No other guy has ever affected me the way Brixton has, and much as I hate to even think it, I’m addicted to the way he makes me feel.

It's a dangerous addiction, and one I desperately need to break.

Because all it takes is one little taste to fall right down the rabbit hole again.

And I know that every time I tumble into that hole, it might be the last time and I won't make it out.

"You wanna come with me?"

He snaps his fingers when I don't answer. "Hello?"

It's then that I snap to attention. He just asked me a question and I missed it because I was so focused on his gorgeously stubbled face.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Where are we going?

"Come on, I'll drive." He looks at me on the crutches. "You need any help?"

"Nah, I've got it."

He shakes his head at me. "Isn't that, like, illegal? Driving like that? If you hit someone, they could sue the fuck outta you."

"How do you know so much about legal shit?" I laugh and hoist myself up on the padded tops of the crutches.

Brixton clicks the alarm on the truck and then runs over to the passenger side to open my door. He takes the crutches and sets them in the backseat. I grab onto the top of the truck and swing myself into the passenger seat. My body screams for Brixton's

hands to help guide me into the truck but my brain says no fucking way. I'm not helpless, and I want his hands on me for other, much more carnal reasons.

"Davis was a lawyer," he says. "And he loved to talk about his job. I listened." Brixton shrugs, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

The door closes and my eyes follow him as he walks around the front of the truck.

God, he's so fucking hot.

I clench my fingers tight.

Dammit. Why can't I feel the same fluttery sensation in my belly when I look at Jack?

Why does it have to be reserved for Brixton?

After allowing a quick glance at his profile, I make a mental list of the reasons why we'd crash and burn.

The biggest one is that he's an emotional train wreck. Yeah, he's all in now to make himself better and create some stability in his life, but I don't even know what put him over the top in the first place.

Was it just the death of his brother or something more? Something deeper?

And does he even know what it is?

Every day I'd wonder when he might snap again and go off the rails.

Because that's what happens when you don't fix the root cause of your problems.

Brixton is doing all the right things from an outsider's point of view. But what's going on in his head? In his heart?

I just can't open myself up to that kind of risk, no matter how much I like him.

Like him.

Maybe more than like him.

I suck in a breath and tear my eyes away, focusing on the buildings buzzing by as Brixton drives.

There's so much I want to say, so many questions I want to ask. But for as open as he is sometimes, other times, most times really, he is completely shut off to the world. Like he doesn't want anyone to see his deepest pain and his darkest secret.

Not even me.

And I can't risk my heart on maybes and sometimes.

I need certainty and always.

Brixton doesn't know the meanings of those words.

"So, Chase told me all about your idea for the kids at the hospital," I say, trying to force a mental detour with my thoughts. "I think it's amazing."

I turn to look at him. His smile practically reaches his ears and my heart jumps.

"I told the guys at the label about it," he says. "And suggested that we do kind of an impromptu secret acoustic concert for the kids. Have some other bands join in the fun

when they're in town."

My jaw drops. "That's fucking brilliant."

"Yeah, I thought so." He laughs. "It's for a great cause. I don't give a damn about promo or image, though. I told them I was gonna do it whether or not they wanted to join in."

Brixton brakes at a light and turns to look at me. "This is to make the kids happy. To do a good thing for people who need it. It's not for money or publicity or any of that crap. I'm going over to the hospital tomorrow to talk to the administrators about it. Chase sent me a text after he set up the meeting."

"That's really great. I'm happy for you."

It's really hard to believe that the guy who was beating the shit out of that biker douchebag is the one sitting next to me now. I want so badly to believe that this guy is here to stay.

I just can't.

Fucking rabbit hole.

"I needed this," he murmurs. "It just feels right, you know?"

"I get it." My eyes drop to where his hand rests on the floor shift. A tingling sensation attacks my fingers and they itch to lace with his again. I swallow hard. "Giving back is really rewarding. And the kids will love you."

"You think?"

I nod, a lump lodging in my throat. “I know.”

Because I do...

The thought explodes in my brain before I can extinguish it.

I shift in the seat, wincing when my right leg twists.

“Are you okay?” Brixton asks. “You want me to pull over?”

I shake my head. “No,” I rasp. “It’s fine. Really.”

“We’ll put some ice on it when we get to Allie’s.”

The rest of the ride passes quickly. My mouth runs at about a mile a minute, saying whatever I can to keep my mind focused on anything other than the way my body hums at Brixton’s nearness and the way his cologne makes my head dizzy with lust.

I let out a relieved breath once we pull up to the curb outside a light blue house with bright white shutters. There are baskets of yellow flowers on either side of the stairs and I can’t help but smile at the sweetness the house exudes.

Brixton helps me out of the truck and I take the crutches from him. “I’ve got it.” I nod my head at the bags in the backseat. “Better start loading up your arms with those toys, Santa. Looks like you have a whole workshop back there.”

I hobble to the front of the house and make my way up the few steps. I have to hop because my knee is taped up and when I reach the top, I heave a deep breath.

“Sorry I’m kind of useless right now.” I smile at him buried under mountains of bags.

“Never,” he says lightly, jogging up the steps and leaning on the bell with his shoulder.

The door swings open.

“Unca Bee!”

“Jujubee!”

I look down at the adorable little girl jumping up and down next to the woman I take to be Allie. Her eyes shine as she looks from Brixton to me and back again.

Allie lifts her daughter into her arms. “My goodness Jules, what did Uncle B bring you this time?”

Julianna blows us kisses and points at the bags. “Toys!”

“You gonna let us in?” Brixton grunts at Allie. “I don’t know how much longer I can carry this stuff before my arms break off.”

The door opens and Brixton nods at me to go in first.

“Wow,” Allie says once we’re both inside and the toys cover the foyer. “I didn’t realize you were bringing...company.”

“He begged me to take him. Said he had to meet this gorgeous girl,” Brixton says, lifting Julianna into the air and blowing raspberries on her pudgy belly.

I stick my hand out to Allie. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Although, truth be told, I didn’t think this day would ever happen.” Her

eyes glitter with excitement and my heart hammers.

Does she think we're together?

Is that what he told her?

The same excitement in Allie's gaze suddenly makes my belly tingle.

Something tugs on my jeans. I look down at Julianna. She is holding up a tiny cup.

"Tea," she says then points to a little table in the front room.

"Tea. I love tea." I grin at her and pink spots creep into her cheeks. "Although I don't know if I'll fit at that table."

"Come on, I'll help you. You can't turn away an invitation from my niece."

"I'd never dream of it. Best invitation I've had in a long time."

Brixton helps me settle onto the couch nearest the tea table and Jules doesn't seem to mind that I'm not squeezed into one of the little chairs. She hands me a plastic scone and my eyes widen.

"This is my favorite flavor. How did you know?"

She giggles, her long pigtails bobbing on her shoulders.

We all make a big show of eating our plastic pastries. I let out a groan and rub my belly once I've finished the scone, a doughnut, and then a muffin.

"That was the best tea party I've ever been to," I say with a big smile.

Jules claps her hands together, and Allie beams at me.

“You’re really great with kids,” she says.

I shrug. “She’s adorable. I’m already in love with her.”

Julianna lays her hand gently on my taped-up knee. She looks at me. “You have a boo boo?”

I nod. “Yeah. But it doesn’t hurt as much when you’re next to me.”

She grazes the top of my knee and I seriously wanna eat this kid up, she’s so stinking cute.

I sneak a look at Brixton. He’s watching me like a hawk, like he wants to devour me whole. My cock twitches, pulse buzzing hard because that’s exactly what I want him to do.

“B, why don’t you get us some cold water?” Allie says. “Sam looks pretty thirsty.”

I clear my throat. Shit, are we being that obvious, eye fucking each other right in front of Allie?

Brixton gives my shoulder a squeeze as he passes me to get to the kitchen.

Allie looks at me, still smiling like she knows something.

Good for her.

I, on the other hand, don’t know shit right now, other than the fact that I want to climb Brixton like a tree.

“So after I spoke to Brixton the other day, I thought you guys were over.”

I cough. “Well, um, you know, we weren’t ever really... together. ”

“Yeah, I know about the arrangement. And I think it was really great of you.”

I toy with the hem of my t-shirt. “I wanted to help him, especially after...you know.”

“Is that all, Sam? You just wanted to help him?” Allie narrows her eyes. “Because I saw the YouTube video of you after that press conference. It didn’t seem like you were defending him out of obligation.”

My jaw drops. “You’re pretty direct.”

Allie cocks her head to the side and tucks her light brown hair behind one ear. “I’m also pretty observant. It’s an occupational hazard since I’m a psychologist.”

“Oh...”

“So let me ask you again. Did you really get involved only to help Brixton? Or is there some other reason why you’re here right now? Because for as gorgeous as my little pumpkin here is, let’s face it. You wouldn’t be here just for air tea and plastic food. Am I right?”

My breath hitches, the words catching in my throat, tangled like a thick knot. And before I can even squeeze out a syllable, there’s a knock at the front door.

Allie furrows her brow and gets up from the floor. She walks over to the door and pulls it open. I can’t see who’s there from my spot on the couch but Allie sounds flustered.

“Martin, what are you doing here? I thought you were coming tomorrow to see Jules.”

“Grampa,” Jules cries out, scrambling to her feet and running to the door.

A tall man who looks like an older, more worn version of Brixton follows Allie into the family room. He stops in the doorway, his blue eyes focused on me.

“You,” he says in a gruff voice. “Aren’t you thinking about your career? You think hanging out with my son is going to do you good? Any association to him will rot everything in your life. If you’re smart, you’ll get out now.”

“Martin,” Allie gasps.

Did he seriously just say that to me? About his own son?

I struggle to get off the couch and grab the crutches. Blood rushes between my ears, my vision flooded with a thick red haze. Anger colors the shock. “Brixton is one of the best people I know. It’s a real shame that as his father, you obviously don’t even see that.”

“He’s a walking wrecking ball. Anything that comes close gets crushed. Hasn’t everything that’s happened in the past couple of weeks shown you that?”

I hop forward on my crutches, my jaw clenched so tight, it might actually crack. “What I’ve seen is a guy who made mistakes and has tried hard to fix them. I’d think that as a parent, you’d recognize his effort.” My lips twist. “Maybe even give him some encouragement. He’s trying to change.”

Martin scoffs. “He’ll never change. He’ll always be the same selfish, self-centered person he always was. Always focused on himself, his music, his life. He’s the reason

why his brother's not here anymore. It's always about Brixton."

"Martin, stop," Allie yells. "That's a horrible thing to say and you know it's not true!"

My heart hammers so hard, it might actually bust out of my chest. "You know, I feel really bad for you, Martin. You're a miserable person who's clearly miserable with his life and feels the need to take it out on the one person he's supposed to love unconditionally." With a shaking voice, I step closer to him.

Then something catches the corner of my eye and I look to my right.

Ice replaces the fire in my veins when Brixton appears in the kitchen doorway, a stricken look on his face. I want to pull him close, to erase the caustic words his father just spoke, to take away the pain that haunts his expression.

The vein in my neck throbs as rage courses through my insides. I hold Brixton's tormented gaze as I spit out my next words at Martin. "He's an amazing man, and if you can't see that, then you don't deserve him as a son."

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Chapter 30

Brixton

My legs shake with each step I take toward my father. Hatred knots in my chest, wrapping tight around my lungs like a thick metal lasso, tugging harder and harder as his caustic words bang between the corners of my mind. It hurts to breathe, to think, to remember.

His eyes narrow in my direction, and the son of a bitch doesn't even have the decency to look the least bit sorry, or even remotely embarrassed about blasting his only living son to a perfect stranger.

Davis is gone. You don't have anyone else to shield you from what you fear most.

Allie's earlier words are like clanging cymbals, rattling my brain.

What I fear most...

Until now, I don't think I knew exactly what that fear was.

But I know now.

I turn my head toward Sam, catching his stricken expression.

Pity. Sadness. Disappointment .

It's all right there in front of me, all the things I never wanted anyone to feel for me. I didn't want people to see through my hard shell, to find out that deep down, I'm still the same scared little boy I was growing up in a loveless household.

For years, I've masked it under my gritty, raw rock star persona. That was the Brixton I became because under the hard edges, that scared little boy was safe and protected, free from my tormented past.

But he's just been exposed in the most vicious way possible, by the one person whose job it is to love me unconditionally.

I continue to move toward my father. Now my eyes are locked on his. My lips quiver with pent-up anger, a throbbing pulse practically exploding out of my neck. I've never felt so much of an urge to crack my fist against someone's jaw for all the heartache, the rejection, the blatant disinterest.

But I don't.

What would it prove? For so many years, he cast me aside and I burrowed behind Davis because he was my protector. I never confronted my father. I just allowed him to treat me like dirt, like I was unworthy of love or respect.

Over the years, I started to believe it.

And the real fear that's been plaguing me since Davis died is...who will ever love me now? Because if my own father can't, how could anyone else?

"I thought for all these years that you treated me like shit because you hated me," I say to my father, my voice shaking with anger.

Blood rushes between my ears, making it near impossible for me to even hear myself

think and process the words rushing from my lips.

“Except that’s not true, is it? It’s you. You hate yourself for letting things happen with Mom. You hate that you weren’t able to stop them. That you didn’t have the power to save her And you took it out on me, an innocent kid, because you knew you couldn’t handle the responsibility, that it would break you. Blaming me kept you safe from all of that.”

I take in a deep, shuddering breath. “You threw away a relationship with your son because you couldn’t process the grief of losing Mom. All these years and you took every opportunity to let me know how I ruined your life, even though you know it wasn’t my fault.”

Tears sting the backs of my eyes. “It wasn’t my fucking fault. And neither was Davis’s death. I blamed myself because I couldn’t see it coming or stop it. Holding myself accountable and suffering from it was my penance. What the fuck was your penance, Dad?”

Somewhere in the distance, I hear quiet sobbing. Allie reaches for Jules and heads for the stairs. Sam moves closer to me but doesn’t speak. I can’t even look at him, but his presence gives me a strength I didn’t know I had.

“Unca Bee,” Jules weeps softly as she walks with Allie, her big blue eyes spilling over with tears. I have to look away because that look on her face can easily make me crumble.

“You don’t know what I lost,” he growls. “You don’t know how amazing she was, how wonderful, how kind, how smart.”

“And you never bothered to tell me,” I sneer. “You were too busy wallowing in your own self-pity to realize that you had a part of her with you every goddamn day. Jesus

Christ, I look just like her.”

“That made me hate you even more. I couldn’t even look at you without remembering how my life ended the day you were born,” he bellows.

Once the words are spoken, his eyes pop open wide, like he didn’t mean to say them but now they’re out, never to be taken back. He gasps then snaps his lips shut.

Words are like weapons. They can do irreversible damage and cause deep scars that will never heal, no matter how hard you try.

I stare at him. “You say I’m selfish and self-centered. That’s ironic because out of the two of us, who’s deflected shit throughout his whole goddamn life? You dumped on me because you’re a weak, pathetic piece of garbage. How the fuck do you think Mom would feel if she saw all of this? If she knew how you’d behaved? How all you did was point fingers, never realizing that part of you was suffering? I grew up without a mother and hated by my father. I only had Davis, and when he was gone, I felt like I had no one.”

Sam lays his hand on my arm, the warmth of his skin touching mine igniting a sense of control deep down inside of me, one I feared I’d lost a long time ago. It fuels my resolve. It assures me that I will not break. I will not bend. And no fucking way will I bow.

My father looks at me, shock settling into his worn face. His lips part and I stick my hand up in front of his face.

“Don’t fucking say a word.” I clench my teeth, my jaw stiff. “You’ve said plenty that I can never unhear, and I don’t want to breathe in a second more of your goddamn toxic air. Fuck you and fuck your life.”

I push past him and twist the front door handle open. I stagger onto the porch. Collapsing against a large white column, my chest heaves as I gulp down air. Heat floods my insides, creeping up the sides of my neck and into my face. I lean my head back against the column, all of the harsh words looping through my mind like a broken record.

I hear the front door close. I don't look up when the bottoms of the crutches scrape along the wood planks in my direction. A strong hand rests on my shoulder, but I can't bring myself to look up.

Sam's the only man I've ever let in. He's the only man I've ever dropped my guard for.

And he's the only man I've ever allowed myself to...

My shoulders slump with the realization I can't deny any longer.

To fall in love with.

He brings me peace and comfort, just like Davis did.

I still can't shake the feeling that Davis sent him to me the night he died, and then again a couple of weeks ago when I was at my lowest.

But now he knows, without a doubt, how much of an emotional disaster I really am.

Not that it matters.

I lost my chance with him and Jack swooped in to claim his.

"I used to blame myself," I say, not able to raise my gaze. "But now I know it's his

problem, not mine.”

“He’s got to live with his choices,” Sam murmurs, squeezing my shoulder. “Shame on him for making the wrong ones over and over.”

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. “I tried. Fuck, I tried so much, so hard, and for so long. He just pushed me further and further away.”

“It’s his loss.”

I turn and stomp down the steps. I see his car parked across the street, and like a magnet, it draws me over. He always kept it so pristine, so clean, always gave me a hard time if I had a snack in the backseat and dropped a single bit of it.

He’s a prick. Always was.

I bend down and grab a rock from a nearby flower bed.

Short, sharp gasps tear at my lungs as I drag it across the shiny paint, leaving a mark. I stand in front of the hood, glaring at the clean windshield. Not a single speck of dirt on the damn thing.

Nothing like the charred and blackened heart he helped create.

I fire the rock at the windshield as hard as I can. It doesn’t break, but the cracks spider out, covering the tempered glass.

The alarm blares out and I smile.

Sam hobbles toward my rental. “Did that feel better?”

“Nah. I’d have rather chucked it at his damn head.” I finally look at Sam and jog over to help him into the passenger seat. Once he’s inside, I walk to the driver’s side, but not before I look back up at Allie’s house. My father’s face is in the window. I flip him off with both hands.

“Fuck you, Dad,” I roar. Then I jump into the driver’s seat, turn on the ignition, and speed down the otherwise quiet street.

“He never gave a damn about me. I spent my whole life waiting for any crumb he’d drop. I wanted a family life like you have, so fucking badly. I thought if he could care about me, I’d be okay. But goddammit, that rejection ate away at me, even though Davis tried to make up for it. I was afraid I’d never be happy. And it took me a long time to realize that I needed to find my own happiness, despite having that rat ass as a father.”

A long silence follows. My heart beats a mile a minute, and for the first time in years, I feel lighter, like I can breathe again. Like I’m free of the judgment and the hate.

I know it still exists, but I left it behind instead of carrying it deep inside of me.

I released it and I’ll never let it plague me again.

“And what would make you happy, Brixton?” Sam asks slowly.

The traffic light turns red and I press my foot on the brake.

Fuck it.

I don’t want to be afraid anymore.

So I’m taking a risk, probably the biggest one of my life.

I turn my head toward him. “You. I was too stupid and too scared to admit it before, but I’m saying it now. I want you , Sam.”

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Chapter 31

Sam

I lay my hand over his and lace my fingers with his, almost too choked with need to respond.

“I want you too, B,” I finally say.

And the look on his face that follows. Fuck, it makes my heart dance in my chest.

Happiness. Pure happiness.

His eyes glitter like Fourth of July sparklers, his smile stretching from ear to ear.

I did that.

“Come home with me.” I squeeze his hand. “I don’t want to get eaten alive by paparazzi camped outside your hotel, and I need to be inside of you. Immediately, if not sooner.”

I shift in the seat. He hasn’t even touched me and yet, my dick is hard and throbbing, aching for release.

I move my hand from his and stroke his thickening cock over his jeans. He doesn’t bother to silence his groan.

“Fuck, you’re gonna make me drive into a tree.”

“Maybe it’ll make you drive faster so I can get you naked.”

I stroke him hard, kneading his balls through the fabric .

If I didn’t have a bum knee, I’d unzip him and suck him down right here and now.

“You’re gonna make me come,” he moans, leaning on his horn by accident.

The person driving the car in front of us sticks his arm out the window and flips us off.

After a minute or two, I ease up on the hand job because if we do end up hitting a tree, I’ll end up having cockblocked myself, which would suck.

I direct him into my private garage and give him the code. The doors open and minutes later, we’re parked and in the elevator on the way to my apartment.

The crutches crash to the floor and Brixton slams me into the back wall of the elevator, crushing his lips against mine. We devour each other like we’re dinner, tongues coiling, teeth cracking, hands frenzied.

I gasp for breath, tugging his hair, dragging my fingers up and down his back. “My God, I need to fuck you so badly.”

“I need you to fuck me so badly,” he mutters, plastering his lips against mine again, his lips hot and hungry for all I have to give.

The elevator finally dings and the doors open on my floor. Brixton swoops down to grab my crutches and helps me adjust myself before we walk to my door.

I grab my keys and try to stick the key in the lock, but Brixton presses himself against me and reaches for my cock. My eyes float closed, his hand on me feels so fucking amazing. I jab the lock with the key over and over again, missing the hole every time.

“See how hard it is to focus when someone’s got your hard cock in his hand, teasing you, making you crazy?” he murmurs against my ear .

“Don’t you want my cock inside of you?” I rasp, thrusting against his relentless hand.

“I just wanted to teach you a lesson first.” He snickers softly and lets me go. I get the key in the lock and twist the handle. Then I shove it open and pull him inside.

He attacks me with his lips again, barely pulling away for a second to pull my shirt over my head. Panting, he slides his hand down the front of my chest, his eyes glowing like blue flames. “I think we need to get you out of these pants.”

“I think you’re right,” I choke out.

He unbuckles me and pops open the button on my jeans. Lowering himself, he slides the jeans down to my ankles. Then he lifts each one of my feet to take them off.

“How’s your leg?” he asks, grasping my cock. He pumps it a few times.

“Fucking amazing,” I groan, my hands threading through his hair.

My ears ring with white noise, heart thrashing hard in my chest when he takes me into his mouth. I squeeze my eyes shut, clenching my teeth as he takes me deep. I hit the back of his throat and he sucks me harder and faster. His lips tighten around me, pulling and tugging as I thrust against his face.

One of his fingers slips between my ass cheeks and he presses into it. I cry out, my

entire body sizzling with the orgasm that's about to consume me. His mouth becomes more insistent, teasing my slit, working in overdrive as he plays with my hole. Everything tingles. My skin is on fire, my bones melting in the molten heat radiating through me.

Blood races to my groin, my cock to the point of bursting. I thrust one final time, my gut clenching as my cock explodes with cum. Brixton doesn't let me move, he keeps me buried in his mouth and swallows every drop before he pulls back.

I drop my eyes to him, my breaths ragged as I lean back against the kitchen counter. He sits back on his heels and grins, his lips glistening with my cum.

"That...was...amazing," I manage to say once I can catch my breath. "But..."

The smile fades and his eyebrows furrow. "But...?"

I reach for him and give his hand a tug to pull him up. "But you're still dressed. And that means I can't fuck you. And I really, really, need to fuck you."

He pulls off his shirt and shoves his own jeans to the floor. Then he kicks them off.

My mouth waters as I sweep my eyes over him, in all his naked, tattooed, pierced glory. His thick, pink cock is hard and he gives it a few strokes.

"No more teasing," he says, snaking an arm around my waist to help me down the hall.

I stop by one room and kick it open, not willing to wait another second for what I've fantasized about since the last time we were together.

It's wrong, I know.

Jack is...Jack. And he's great in almost every way. He was for me, for a very long time.

But he'll never be Brixton.

Brixton settles me on the bed and runs his hand over my knee. "Are you comfortable?"

"If someone was stabbing me in the foot right now, I don't think I'd even feel it," I say.

He smiles. "Good."

"There's a bottle of lube in the drawer."

Brixton leans over me to open the drawer and then grabs the bottle. I reach for it and flip the top open. After slathering my cock with the lube, I spread my bent legs.

"Get over here," I growl, my voice thick with lust.

Brixton crawls over to me and lays one leg over mine, straddling me. He dips his head, runs his fingers through my hair, and presses his forehead against mine.

I hold him tight with one arm, my free hand circling his asshole. I push two fingers into the tight ring of muscle and he gasps, jutting his hips against me. The tip of his cock leaks with precum, coating my skin with evidence of his desire. His lips graze mine, gently at first. As I scissor my fingers, he gets more aggressive, dragging my lower lip between his teeth and delving his tongue throat deep.

I crook my fingers to hit his spot and he clenches his ass, his movements urging me to go deeper and harder.

“Fuck me,” he rasps, fisting my hair. “Please.”

I thrust into his ass and almost come on the spot even though I just came a few minutes earlier. His hole is tight and hot. He rides me, muscles stretching as his body welcomes me. Our tongues tangle, twisting like fiery hot coils of lust, the heady scent of sex swirling in the air around us.

He holds me tight, and at this moment, we’re connected at the deepest level imaginable. I never move my eyes from his face. I can’t. It’s too beautiful, too pure. Dots of color flood his cheeks, his eyes the brightest I’ve ever seen.

I don’t want to miss a second of it.

I don’t want it to ever end.

When he captures my lips again, I drink him in, every emotion in his expression, his touch, his sounds...I need it all.

And he chose me to give it all to...to give himself to.

A cry slips from his lips and he pulls away, his breathing ragged. “Fuck, yes. Right there. Don’t fucking stop.”

A fierce explosion fires deep in my core, electricity flowing out to every cell. My body shudders, the orgasm racing to the head of my cock as Brixton writhes against me. Thick ropes of his cum spew across my chest. Brixton leans into me with another mind-altering kiss, and with one final thrust, I come again.

We lie there together, our lips entwined for I don’t even know how long. And I’m in no rush to break away from this man.

He leans his head back and I drag my tongue down the side of his neck, nipping at the skin. Then I lean forward and graze his pierced nipple with my tongue, smiling when he jerks at the sensation.

“I love when you do that,” I murmur.

I love everything about you.

I love you...

But I let those words simmer on my tongue. I know what just happened between us but I also know that his head is a million ways fucked up, especially after what happened with his asshole father. I wasn't about to let him be alone. I wanted to be with him, to support him in any way I could, to be the friend I knew he needed.

I can't fool myself into thinking that he wants more than sex right now, no matter what he says, no matter what he thinks. The guy is traumatized, and I just made this harder on myself because I'm in way over my head with him.

He climbs off of me, careful not to hit my bad knee. Then he drops his head down and gives it a kiss. With a wink, he slides off the bed. Then he walks into the bathroom. A minute later, he comes back with a couple of washcloths. He's silent as he cleans me up. Then he looks at me with a smile.

“Thanks for being there for me. I really needed a friend after all that.”

His words are like a machete to my chest.

Friend.

He needed a fucking friend.

I should have known. Why the fuck did I think this time would be different? He was upset and needed someone to take away the pain.

I allowed myself to be that doormat.

Again.

And the heart that, only seconds earlier, was doing the polka in my chest, is now deflated like a goddamn slashed helium balloon.

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Chapter 32

Brixton

I drop kisses onto Sam's shoulder the next morning, hoping that whatever was eating him last night isn't gonna wake up with him. We fucked around for the better part of the night but something felt off. It's like a wall crashed down between us. I can't figure it out. The first time was so hot and intimate and after that? It was like he just wasn't into it anymore.

I don't understand how.

He rocked my fucking world.

Didn't I do the same to him?

We had dinner, watched Netflix. He didn't say much, which definitely isn't like him.

I asked if maybe his leg was bothering him. He said it was a little sore.

So maybe that was the problem?

I hate thinking that I might have hurt him.

His eyes open. When I kiss him, he turns away.

"Sorry, my knee. I just need to get up and...move around..." He struggles to get out

of the bed .

“You need help?” I ask, jumping up after him.

“No,” he says without even looking at me. “I have to get ready.”

I furrow my brow. “For what?”

“Rehab,” he says shortly. Not that he so much as turns his head toward me.

I follow him and grab his arm. “Hey.”

He stops but doesn’t turn around.

“Sam, what the hell is up? I thought we had a great night. What changed? Did I do something?”

That’s when he looks at me. His dark eyes harden, and I recoil because I’ve never seen such disgust in his gaze.

Not even when I was being a complete prick a couple of weeks ago. There was frustration and anger, yeah. But nothing like this kind of disdain. It stings, I’m not gonna lie.

“I can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what?” I ask.

“Look, Brixton. I know yesterday was really hard for you. And I’m glad I could be there for you .”

His scathing tone makes me take a step back.

“But I’m not in this. I can’t be. I just...” He lets out a frustrated sigh.

My back stiffens. “You’re not in this? Are you fucking kidding me? When did you decide this? After which fucking orgasm last night?”

“This isn’t about sex. You need to work on yourself. I can’t help you with that. I can’t be...” He sweeps a hand through his hair, biting off his last words. “I’m sorry.”

My jaw drops but I can’t even think of the words to say.

And before I can speak a single syllable, he disappears into the bathroom and closes the door.

If that wasn’t an exit cue, then I don’t know what fucking is .

I stand there for a long minute and push back my hair.

What fucking alternate reality did I just step into?

How the fuck?—?

I drop my hands and glare at the bathroom door.

No.

Hell to the fucking no .

I’m Brixton goddamn Scott. I don’t need him. I don’t need anyone.

Rage gathers force in my gut, rushing to my chest. My shoulders shake, fists clench tight.

“You know what, Sam? You’re not so goddamn perfect, either. Running back to your pretty puckhead boyfriend because you’re afraid of what might happen if you took a risk. Listening to your parents because you’re too much of a pussy to make your own choices. You’re pathetic. At least I owned up to my shit. How about you? Or maybe Jackie boy will be there to make excuses so you don’t have to. Fucking pathetic,” I roar.

I stalk into the foyer and pull on my clothes. I grab my keys and then the door handle. I turn, my lips trembling with anger.

“And just so you know, you can’t hold a candle to Travis fucking Kelce as the best tight end in the league, you assbag.”

That was low, but fuck it.

I feel a tiny bit better after saying it.

I pull open the apartment door and slam it so hard behind me that the walls shake.

Something shatters inside the apartment and I let out a breath.

I hope it was something he loved.

Bastard.

When I’m in my truck, I sit still for a long minute and grip the steering wheel like I’d like to grip Sam’s throat. I swallow hard, startled when my phone pings with a text.

I pull the phone from my pocket, my pulse thundering .

Could it be?—?

But it isn't.

It's Lane.

Hey, you there?

I suck in a breath and stab at the keyboard.

Yes.

Three gray dots appear as he types.

Good. Come meet me for breakfast. Ray's Diner. You know the place.

Yeah, I know the place. Best corned beef hash on the West Coast. Not that I can even think about eating anything right now.

Meet you there in ten.

When I pull into the diner parking lot, my blood is still on high boil. I glare at my phone before stuffing it into my pocket. No call from Sam in the ten minutes after I stormed out of his place and evidently, his life.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face and take a deep breath. The urge to go back to Sam's apartment and beat him with his own crutches is damn strong.

Fuck him.

I need to work on myself.

What the hell about him?

I let out a groan and slam my hands on the steering wheel.

The demons nip at my heels.

This is why I don't get close to anyone .

Nobody will love you if your own father can't.

Fuck corned beef hash. I need vodka.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. My hair sticks up in a million different directions from me constantly tugging on it. I don't bother to smooth it back. It's wild and chaotic and right now, that's exactly how I feel.

I get out of the car and walk toward the entrance. It's mid-morning, so the breakfast rush is over and it should be pretty quiet inside. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the flash of a camera and grit my teeth.

I'm so not in the mood for paparazzi right now.

Ignoring it, I duck inside and scout the small space until I see Lane in a far corner booth at the back. It's not until I get close that I see he's not alone.

I stop in front of the table.

Dak and Aidan look up at me from under the brims of their baseball caps.

Lane clears his throat. "I thought it would be a good idea to talk about the future of the band. Together."

"You guys flew in just for breakfast?" I ask.

Dak flashes a smirk. "Well, breakfast and to potentially audition new front men."

"Oh, yeah? And how's that going?" I bite out.

"B, sit," Lane orders.

I drop into the booth next to him. "So this is an ambush? You brought me here to lay the news on me before I find out in the tabloids?"

"No, dick," Aidan says. "There aren't going to be any auditions."

Dak chuckles. "There never were going to be. You're the heart and soul of Sin City. Nobody could replace your arrogant ass. "

"But," Aidan says. "That doesn't mean shit between us is fixed and forgiven."

"No," I say. "It's not. So let's start with that, yeah?"

"You pulled away after Davis died. You skipped practices, were fucking pickled for the better part of two years because of all the booze, you didn't engage, you didn't show up for events." Aidan takes a sip of his coffee. "You weren't in it anymore. Didn't seem like anything could pull you back."

"And what about you?" I shoot back to Aidan. "Did you even bother to talk to me? To ask me how I was?"

“It’s a little hard to be sympathetic when your lead singer is bombed off his ass all the time and doesn’t remember shit from one night to the next. We were always there for you. You were just too out of your mind to realize it. And we dealt with it because Sin City got so big so fast and we had that as a distraction,” Dak says. “But when the dust settles, it’s gotta be us. It can’t be us and you. We’re a team or we’re not.”

I lean forward into my hands. “I fucked up, guys. And I got chewed out by the label, too. But I want to make things better. I’ve realized a lot over the past couple of weeks. I don’t want to cut myself off anymore. Yeah, it took me a long time to deal with Davis’s death, and I had a hard time with it for a lot of reasons. But I can finally see things clearly. I own my mistakes and I’m making up for them. And I’m sorry for what happened at the press conference. That was probably the peak of my dickheadedness.”

“Arguable,” Aidan says. “I can think of a few other times that could rival it.”

I give him a punch in the shoulder.

“We built this thing together and we all want to see it through,” Lane says. “That’s why we’re all here right now. I talked to Aidan and Dak and told them we talked. Nobody wants to break up the band. And everyone is willing to overlook the fact that you were a selfish, self-centered pain in the ass over the past couple of years.”

“I like how you slipped that dig in,” I mutter with a smile.

“Yeah, well, we were all thinking it.” Lane laughs. “We had a rough patch. The important thing is that we bury it and move forward.”

As I watch the guys joke, laugh, and dig into their breakfasts, I am consumed with a sense of belonging that I resisted for a long time. Maybe I pulled away because I felt like without Davis, the guys would end up rejecting me, too. So subconsciously I was

pushing them away and driving them to that end to convince myself I was right about the need to self-protect.

As it happened, all I was doing was self-sabotaging.

Family is the most important thing.

Doesn't need to be blood to be considered family, either.

I realize that now.

And it's been a long time coming.

"I've got an idea I wanna run past you guys. Lane and I talked about it the other day but it would be great if you guys were onboard, too."

I go through the details of my plan and when they smile and nod, it lights me the fuck up.

They love it.

"We're in," Aidan says. "Anything you need, whenever you need."

"New tour won't start for about eight months so we've got lots of time," I say. "And we don't need to limit it to Oakland, either. We can do drop-ins in the cities we visit. Make it a nationwide kind of thing."

The more I talk about it, the more excited I get .

And there's only one person who jumps to mind when I think about who I want to share that excitement with, even though I just walked out on him.

I lift my chipped white mug and sip the coffee the server just refilled, ignoring the scorching heat on the tip of my tongue.

This is exactly the kind of thing that would make Sam happy. Patching shit up, moving forward, doing good for myself and others. It's totally his bag. Not that he'd give a shit now.

"So we're good," Lane says, clapping me on the back once we're outside in front of our cars.

I force a smile. "Yeah. I'm headed to Mercy Hospital now to meet with the administrators so we can share the idea and maybe pick a date for the first private acoustic show."

We do the whole bro hug thing on the sidewalk, and then Dak and Aidan jump into a waiting Escalade. I turn to Lane. "You're not going with them?"

"Nah. I drove myself." He gives me a long look. "You sure you're good? You don't look it."

I let out a deep sigh and sweep a hand through my hair. "Yesterday was a total shit show at Allie's. My dad showed up, words were said." I pause. "Rocks were thrown. Literally."

"Fuck," Lane breathes out.

"Yeah. Sam was with me."

Lane's eyebrows fly upward at that. "How'd that happen?"

"I thought we were friends. Hoped we'd be more than that, but he's not into it." I

shrug. “Moving on.”

“Dude, of course he wants more than that. Anyone who doesn’t live under a fucking rock can see how much he wants that from a mile away.”

“Yeah, well, they’d be wrong. He made that clear to me today. Whatever. I don’t want to deal with any relationship crap right now. I’ve got more important shit to focus on.” I trace the tip of my Nike over a crack in the sidewalk.

“I think you’re making a mistake. There must be a reason. You owe it to yourself to find out what’s going on in his head.”

I hold up a hand. “Lane, I appreciate your pep talk, but it’s done. He’s gonna be with that tool, Jack Larsen. He’s the guy Sam needs. I’m not gonna get in their way.”

Lane is silent for a minute. “I’m sorry, B. I didn’t know Jack was back in the picture.”

“When he signed with Oakland, he busted through the picture.” I roll my eyes. “Fuck it. I need to focus on myself and Sin City.”

“Okay, if you say so.” But he looks damn doubtful.

Kind of how I feel.

But I’m not gonna let myself get kicked in the teeth again. I’ve got at least one tiny shred of pride left, dammit.

“Gotta run,” I say after glancing at the time on my phone. “I’ll let you know how it goes later.”

I stab the hospital address into my GPS and sit back against the leather seat, my shoulders slumping a little.

It hurts like hell to hit rock bottom.

I guess this is the upward climb, and so far, it hasn't been a fucking picnic.

Maybe I was wrong about why Davis sent Sam to me. Maybe he was part of the wake-up call from my perpetual living nightmare.

For the next twenty or so minutes, I'm lost in my tormented thoughts.

Still shredded on the inside.

I've said a lot of things to different people, but that closure still escapes me, both with my dad and Sam. Having a say doesn't resolve shit, and without resolution, it's a Band-Aid and bubble gum fix. It'll never hold .

There's nobody at the entrance of the parking garage. I pull inside the darkened space and wind my way up the levels until I find an empty spot. I jump down from the driver's seat and slam the door shut. The sign for the elevator is the only light in the place.

I hunch forward and pull on my baseball cap, pulling the brim low.

My phone pings, and my heart lurches in response. A defeated sigh escapes my lips when I see it's a text from Chase. He's going meet me in the front lobby on the first floor.

I trudge toward the elevator, Sam's words looping through my mind, each go around making me more and more pissed off.

Where the fuck does he get off saying that shit and then walking away, like my opinion didn't matter at all?

I ball my hands into tight fists and walk across the lot toward the metal doors. Tires squeal along the concrete floor, jolting me from my angry inner diatribe. Flashing headlights make me squint. I jump back as a black car swings around the bend, nearly hitting me.

“What the fuck?” I yell, my hat flying off my head.

The smell of burning rubber grips my gut.

The car screeches to a sudden stop. I squint at the darkened windows. The back one opens part way.

I twist away a second too late, choking on a breath.

Maybe my last.

Bullets crack, shattering the silence around me.

I crumple to the ground as the car zooms away. A searing pain explodes down my left side as I try to pull in air, to yell for help. But nothing comes out. I try to claw at the ground with my right hand, to pull myself to the elevator.

My head feels like it's a hundred pounds, vision blurring like I'm peering through water. The garage gets darker. Sirens ring between my ears.

I have to get help. Have to?—

But I can't move. Can't breathe.

Numbness creeps into my limbs, erasing the pain and all my thoughts as I'm swallowed by blackness.

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Chapter 33

Sam

I raise my head off the pillow and turn my head toward the training room door when I hear the light knock.

“Come in,” I grunt.

Coach Taylor pops his head into the room. “How are you feeling?”

Sick. Devastated. Pissed off. Rejected.

Where the fuck you want me to start, Coach?

“I’ve had better days.”

A concerned expression flashes across the coach’s face and I let out a sigh. “My leg’s okay. Doc thinks I should be good to play in a couple of weeks, right in time for the playoffs.”

Coach’s face relaxes into a smile. “That’s very good news.” He steps toward me, pulls off his hat, and wrings it in his hands. “And, uh, the other stuff...how’s that going?”

I let out a sharp laugh. “The other stuff. You mean with Brixton Scott.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Don’t you read the tabloids, Coach? ”

His smile gets sheepish. “I try to avoid ‘em. Nothing good ever comes out of believing that trash.”

“Well, in this case, you can believe it. We’re done. So nobody in the organization has to worry about any backlash from my romantic life.”

I shift on the table, wincing when a rush of pain explodes down my leg. I dig my fingers into the sides of the worn green leather.

“You know,” Coach says, sticking his hat back on. “I wasn’t really worried about backlash on the team. I was more worried about you. I’ve never seen you upset like you were at that press conference. I know the suits were pissed about how it’d reflect on them, but I was afraid you’d suffer way more than anyone if things went south with that rocker guy.”

“I appreciate that, Coach.” I swing myself to a seated position. “But I’m good. It wasn’t serious.”

“I hear Jack Larsen is back in town. Signed with the Raptors, yeah?”

“Yep.”

“That a good thing or a bad thing?”

I shrug. “He’s a friend.” My heart clenches when the word slips out of my mouth.

“Nothing more?”

I open my mouth to respond when the door opens again. Dr. Rick, the team doctor, walks in and Jack is right behind him.

He looks about as angry as I feel.

“Coach, looks like you’re going to get your superstar tight end back in a couple of weeks.”

Coach Taylor nods. “Looking forward to it, Doc.” He casts a glance at Jack and then back at me. “Stay well, Sammy.”

“Will do, Coach. See you at practice. ”

Dr. Rick removes the heating pad from my knee and I lower myself onto the floor. Jack just stares at me, his lips tight.

He’s going to want answers.

And I can’t hide them from him anymore.

A few minutes later, I’m back on my crutches, hobbling out of the training room with Jack next to me. I can practically feel the steam coming out of his ears, he’s so heated.

When we’re out of earshot of the doctor, he stops in front of me and turns with a fierce glare in his eye.

“What happened to you yesterday?”

I swing my back against the cinderblock wall and lean against it. “I went to Play It Forward because I needed to get the hell out of my apartment. I was getting cabin

fever.”

“But you didn’t actually make it inside, did you?” he says, his tone accusatory. “When I didn’t hear back from you after the voicemails I left, I called around. Sofia said you weren’t there. Your parents and Chase hadn’t heard from you, either. So where the hell were you? And why weren’t you answering your phone?”

I heave a deep sigh and lean my head back against the wall. “I must have shut off my ringer.”

“And you didn’t think to look at your phone at all?” he asks. “I stayed with you since your injury to make sure you were okay. And you didn’t even have the decency to let me know not to come over yesterday.” His eyes narrow. “I’ve given up a lot to be there for you. I’m not a fucking doormat, Sam.”

I swallow a laugh. What a sick twist of irony.

After weeks of willingly being a doormat for Brixton, I’ve turned Jack into the same damn thing.

“Were you with him?” Jack asks, his voice dripping with disgust. “Is that why you were dodging my calls?”

I scrape a hand down the front of my face. “I wasn’t trying to dodge anything. I told you, I just needed to get out?— ”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Jack’s eyes spit flames. “Or maybe you just did.”

With a roll of my eyes, I stab the floor with the rubber bottoms of my crutches. “Fine, I was with Brixton. But it’s not what you think. He saw me outside Play It Forward. I really did go. But he asked if I wanted to take a ride to his sister-in-law’s house. I

figured, why not?"

"Why not?" Jack lets out a biting laugh. "Why not? Really?"

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. "I'm sorry, when did I give up the right to choose who I want to spend time with?"

"The guy is a fucking mess. Everyone knows it, except for you. And I get it. You feel bad for him. You feel like you owe him. But he doesn't give a shit about you. He only cares about himself. And he makes that clear all the fucking time. Don't you remember the press conference?"

"He was going through a rough time?—"

Jack shakes his head. "Jesus, you're such a fucking bleeding heart. Sometimes there isn't any good, Sam. Okay? Sometimes, it's just bad, through and through. Open your fucking eyes and see what everyone else does."

"When the hell did you become so cynical?" I growl. "Can you blame me for wanting to help him?"

Jack paces in front of me. He lets out a groan. "Oh, for Christ's sake. Are you gonna let yourself be indebted to him forever because of what happened? It was out of your control. You had nothing to do with what happened to his brother."

"It hit home," I hiss. "It was my brother who almost died. And to know Chase was saved because of his brother, it's not something I can just blow off. It means something to me. And fuck you for being so callous. Maybe you'd have done things differently if you were in my position, but guess what? You're not. And I'm handling it the way I feel I should. I don't give a damn what you or my parents think."

Jack pauses, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “Sam, I didn’t come here to fight with you. There is a reason why I signed with Oakland, why I’ve been at Play it Forward so much, why I’ve been by your side since your injury. It’s because I want to be with you. I didn’t want to push things, but you have to know that you’re why I came back to California.”

He walks toward me, locking me against the wall. “I had other offers. I chose to be close to you so we could try again. I hated the way we left things when I moved out east. I never wanted to lose you. But I can’t compete with Brixton Scott. I won’t. So if it’s him you want, tell me now and I’ll walk away.”

“I’m not with Brixton,” I say. “And I won’t ever be. But that’s not why you and I won’t work.” I grip the sides of the crutches, wrapping my fingers tight around the metal. “When you got signed by New York, I was excited for you. It was a great opportunity. But I knew then that we weren’t going to make it. Not because of the distance. I got tired of being one half of a pro athlete power couple. I want more out of my life. I’m not the same guy I was years ago. I have different goals, way beyond my football career.”

“And you think I can’t support those new goals? That I’m a superficial hockey player whose only focus is the limelight?”

“You love hockey. But you also loved the attention we got when we were together. I think part of you wanted that back once you signed with Oakland. There’s nothing wrong with liking the limelight, but when the lights dim and you’re left without the cameras, then what do you have left?”

“I thought we’d have each other.” A pained look flickers in his gaze.

“Would that have been enough for you?” A sad smile lifts my lips. “Would you be happy hiding in the shadows with me? You’re a superstar. Teams are clamoring for

you to play with them, throwing money at you from all directions. You're on top of the world right now and you deserve someone who wants to be up there with you. But I've learned in the past couple of weeks that being the center of attention is the absolute worst place for me. It's not what I want. I work with nonprofit organizations because the people who need help are the ones who deserve the attention. I don't want it wasted on me."

"You're an amazing guy." Jack runs a hand down the side of my face. "And you were always enough. I'm sorry if I ever made you think you weren't."

"We just want different things. It happens. It doesn't change the great times we had. And I really hope that one day we can be friends. I don't want to lose that."

Jack nods and turns away. "Wow. I didn't expect to have this conversation when I came down here today."

"I should have been honest with you earlier. I figured if I gave it a shot, maybe we could rekindle things. But I'm just in a different place right now. I'm sorry."

"So this is what it feels like to be dumped," Jack muses, stroking his chin. "Not loving it."

"I'm sure it won't be long before you find a hot puckboy who can take away the pain of losing me." I waggle my eyebrows.

"Yeah, I won't grieve for too long." He winks at me. "No offense."

"None taken." I push off the wall and settle back on the crutches. "But since you're here, I could use a ride..."

"Okay, now you're pushing it."

I laugh. My phone vibrates against my leg and I fumble in my pocket to grab it. It slips from my fingers and I juggle it in the air with one hand to keep it from crashing to the ground. I catch it before it slips out again and stab the Accept button when I see Chase's name flash across the screen.

"Hey, what's u?—?"

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling you for an hour."

My chest tightens at the alarm in his voice. "I'm at rehab for my knee. My phone wasn't on me and the ringer was off. What's wrong? Is it Mom or Dad?"

"No." Chase pauses, and when I'm about to scream at him to tell me what the hell happened, he finally speaks.

"Brixton was gunned down in the parking garage here at the hospital. Security found him and rushed him to the emergency room."

I collapse backward against the wall, the crutches crashing to the floor at my feet.

My heart lodges in my throat, thin streams of sweat slithering down my spine. Blood rushes between my ears, pulse thundering hard. I clutch the phone tight in my shaking hand because I know there's more he hasn't told me.

"Is he okay?" I manage to croak the words even though I don't know if I want to hear the answer.

"I'm so sorry, Sam," he says in a low voice. "They don't think he's going to make it."

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Chapter 34

Sam

The phone drops from my hand. White noise assaults my ears.

Brixton...gunned down...parking lot...they don't think he's going to make it.

Jack shakes my shoulder. "Sam, what happened?"

Fear snakes through my bones, whipping around my heart and squeezing it like a vise.

My eyes slowly focus.

"Brixton. He's in the emergency room. He was..." My voice cracks. "Shot."

"Fuck." He looks at me, his brows knitted together. "You want to go to him."

He doesn't ask it as a question because he knows. He can see it.

I nod, unable to speak.

He helps me adjust myself with the crutches once he picks them up from the floor. We don't speak the entire car ride to Mercy. The silence is like clanging gongs. Deafening. Leaving me with nothing to blunt the horrible thoughts racing through my head.

Lunchtime traffic is brutal.

Jack weaves in and out of cars while I clutch the sides of his leather seat, as if digging my fingers into the cushions can somehow be a lifeline for Brixton.

As if I can hold onto him tighter to prevent him from disappearing from my life.

Because much as I hate to admit it, I want...no, need him.

He opened himself up to me and I shut him out.

I was afraid of the damage it would do when he broke my heart.

But it's nothing compared to the devastation that would ravage me from losing him so tragically.

Scenarios tumble around my mind, each worse than the one before it.

My fingertips numb from pressing into the seats so hard.

It can't end like this.

He has to pull through. After all he's been through, after all he's tried to correct in his life...it's not fair for him to be yanked so viciously from it.

"You love him," Jack says quietly.

I lean forward, my head in my hands. "I do. Not that it makes us right for each other. But fuck, I do."

Jack rubs a hand down my back, his resigned sigh echoing in the small space.

“I hope you get the chance to tell him.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

I sit up straight against the seat. Jack turns the corner toward the hospital entrance and stops short. Police cars block off the road, flashing lights blinding me as Jack lowers his window.

One of the officers walks up to the window, barking about how nobody is getting through. Then he peers into the car, his jaw dropping when he sees us. “Oh, I’m sorry about that. Please go right ahead, gentlemen.”

Jack nods. “Thanks.”

The officer waves us around the barricade and the crowds of people horded around the top of the driveway. There are candles and flowers and pictures all around the perimeter. People hold up lighters, waving them in the brisk breeze, their faces somber. Some are tear-streaked.

Their expressions are like machine gun sucker punches right to my chest.

“It’s like he’s already—” I swallow hard but the words knot in my throat, choking me.

“Don’t say it,” Jack warns. “You won’t know anything until you get inside and talk to someone.”

We pull up to the revolving glass doors and I push open the truck door. I hop out of the truck on my good leg and pull my crutches from the floor of the backseat.

I don’t want to waste a single second.

Who knows how many more he might have?

“Sam, wait, let me help you,” Jack says.

I don’t. I can’t.

One of the crutches gets caught on the side of the door as I’m fishing it out. I give it a good tug and stumble backward a few steps as I pull it free. I stick them under my arms and hobble toward the door. I lean into the glass and give it a push, keeping it moving with my left shoulder. Once I’m inside, the smell of antiseptic cleaner immediately hits my nostrils. My gut churns, bile rising in the back of my throat when I see Allie’s tear-streaked face across the waiting room.

She runs over to me and hugs me tight .

My heart drops into my sneakers.

Please, no...

Chase is right behind her.

And in the corner is Martin, hunched over and hugging Jules tight.

“Is he okay?” I say, my voice hitching. “Tell me he’s going to be okay.”

They exchange a look and my stomach threatens to revolt.

Chase puts a hand on my arm. “Sit down.”

I shake it off. “Fuck that. Don’t coddle me. Just tell me.”

He sighs and brings a hand to the back of his head. “Brixton suffered penetrating cardiac trauma from the gunshots. He’s in surgery now, but...” He trails off for a second and averts his eyes. “There’s a lot of damage to his heart. It’s not looking good.”

“No,” I say. “Don’t you tell me that. He can’t...don’t let him...”

My mind spins like an out-of-control top.

“You can’t let him die. Please. He has to be okay.”

“Look, Sam. You need to understand the severity here. One of the bullets had a clean exit. No damage. But the other one really did a number on him. Tore through his chest and injured the right ventricle and surrounding vessels. I’m not a heart surgeon, but I know the ones working on him are the best in the state. They’re going to do everything they can to keep him alive. But you need to prepare yourself. The damage is extensive and his body is very weak right now from blood loss.”

“And what about the shooter? Does anyone know any fucking thing about the shooter?” My voice rises and people look over at me.

Chase shakes his head. “Security is going through footage on the data feeds from the garage surveillance, but the shooter’s face was covered. Windows tinted. License plate covered. The cops aren’t confident they can find the person, or people, who did this.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous,” I yell.

“I know, but they can only do so much with what they have. They’re working hard, though. Nobody wants to see this go unsolved. There will be a lot of pressure to find the person, or people, responsible.”

Allie sobs loudly and I tighten my arm around her. “So we’re just supposed to sit around and wait?”

Chase nods. “And pray. Very freaking hard.”

Déjà vu washes over me as I hunch over the top of the pew in the hospital chapel. My mind trips back to the night two years earlier when I was praying for my family and Chase.

How the hell am I here again?

And what will the outcome be this time?

I breathe in the spicy scent of incense.

I ball my hands into fists and pound them on the shiny wood.

Will I be able to tell him how I feel about him?

Or will I have missed my chance because I was too afraid of what might have happened if I was honest with him?

So many questions.

And no answers at all.

The door to the chapel creaks open. I whip my head around, half-panicked about seeing Chase in his white coat.

But it isn’t Chase standing in the doorway.

It's Allie.

She drops into the pew next to me. "I hope it's okay that I'm here."

I nod. "Of course. "

She swipes at the tears on her cheeks. "It's so wrong that he's here right now. He's a great guy. So few people get to see all the good in him. I know that's his fault," she says with a small smile. "But he opened up to you. In the whole time I've known him, I've never seen him smile so big or laugh so hard as he did with you yesterday. I mean, before Martin showed up."

I shake my head. "How could he say those things to Brixton? And worse, how could he mean them?"

Allie tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Their relationship was always rocky. They pretty much stayed out of each other's ways. Barely spoke. It had gotten worse as Brixton got older and started the band from what Davis told me. B went kind of rogue for a while, attracting negative attention, getting into trouble. It was all a cry for help, according to Davis. But Martin didn't know how to deal with it. He never really 'got' Brixton. And he definitely never got over losing his wife."

She leans forward onto the pew, resting her head on her arms. "Both of them are so lost. And they're hurting badly, especially after losing Davis. They need each other now more than ever."

"At least he's here," I mutter.

"Yes," she says. "Right where he should be. I just pray that he has the chance to make things right."

“Did Brixton ever tell you that this is where we first met?”

“Yes, but only a couple of weeks ago. It was when he found out about Chase’s letter.”

“That letter turned him into a raging asshole.” A faraway smile lifts my lips. “It’s the reason why we ended up ‘together’ in the first place. If he hadn’t found it and hadn’t run into me at that bar...”

“So much would be different,” she muses. “But not necessarily better.”

“How do you mean?”

“I believe that everything happens according to a plan. We may not like the plan, but it’s all out of our control. You guys came together for a reason a couple of years ago. I don’t think it was coincidence. You’re connected through Davis because you both need each other. B hit rock bottom when he met you, and you helped him claw his way out of it. And you...I think you felt the need to help him because of what Davis gave to your family. I saw how you defended him at the press conference. It was deeper than just a surface-level show. And based on what I saw at my house, you found someone who could light you up in a way you never thought possible. Call it divine intervention or whatever you want. You were meant to find each other. You’re better together.”

I stare at her. “How could you possibly know?—?”

She shrugs. “I’m a bit of a hockey fan. I know all about you and Jack Larsen. You may have been America’s puckhearts, but I never saw you glow like a candle when you guys were photographed together. Not the way you did with Brixton yesterday. And I saw you for all of, what? Half an hour before all hell broke loose?”

“You’re pretty perceptive.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my job.”

I drum my fingers on the top of the pew. “You know, for whatever it’s worth, I always believed we were supposed to find each other again. I didn’t know how it might happen but I knew that night that when the circumstances were right, we’d run into each other. And I never told anyone but my brother Chase about meeting him that night. I always felt it was too personal. Too intimate.”

I cover my face with my hands. “And when it came time to tell him the most personal, intimate thing of all, I pulled away. I told him I didn’t want to be with him, that he needed to figure his own shit out. That I wasn’t in it.” Tears sting my eyes. “The last words I spoke to him were lies because I was too chicken shit to tell him the truth. He trusted me, but I couldn’t trust him back. I broke us, and now I might never get the chance to fix us.”

Chapter 35

Sam

By the time Chase finally comes to let me know Brixton was out of surgery and moved into the Intensive Care Unit hours later, I think I've worn off the sole of my one sneaker from all the pacing. My good leg and both of my arms are damn sore, but I need to keep moving. If I stand still, the darkness hovering in the air will creep in and swallow me whole.

"I have to get back to my rounds but I wanted to let you know what was going on," Chase says.

A deep sigh sags my shoulders. I keep pacing. "Did the doctors say anything? When will he wake up?"

"They don't know. They're going to run tests but..." I stop to look at him and he pauses, deliberately looking away from me. "He's still unresponsive. There was a lot of damage that they didn't even realize until they opened him up. They don't..." He presses his lips together for a long second. "They don't feel confident."

I stomp over to him. "I want to talk to the doctor. Now. Where is he?" My pulse beats a hole into my neck. "I will find the best cardiac surgeon in the country if these doctors can't do the job. I'll pay any price. Just?—"

"Sam."

My spine stiffens at his chilling tone.

“He can’t go through another surgery right now. His body is way too weak.” Chase taps a long black stylus against his iPad, clearly biding his words. “He also went into cardiac arrest during the surgery. The doctors said it was a miracle that they were able to bring him back at all. If they cut him again, he will likely die on the operating table. As it is, they don’t even know if he’s going to wake up.”

A doctor appears around a corner, nods toward Chase, and walks over.

Panic wrenches my gut.

“Dr. Rajan, this is my brother, Sam.” Chase looks at me. “Dr. Rajan is the lead cardiothoracic surgeon who was working on Brixton.”

The doctor sticks his hand out to me.

I just glare at it and then at him.

“You’re supposed to save lives. Why the hell can’t you help him?”

“Sam,” Chase hisses.

“Mr. Hartley, I can appreciate your concern, but we did everything we could. The damage?—”

“No, I don’t want to hear about the damage. I want to hear about the fixes.” My fists clench. “Why don’t we start there? And if you can’t take proper care of him, I’ll find someone who can.”

“Jesus Christ,” Chase mutters, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Dr. Rajan folds his hands together. “I understand your agitation. I’ve spoken to Mr. Scott’s father and sister-in-law already. I’ve discussed the prognosis with them. But you aren’t immediate family. So while I can appreciate your concern, you’ll need to speak to them for details.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’m sorry.” Dr. Rajan turns away and continues down the hallway.

“Is he seriously leaving right now? When Brixton is clinging to life in that bed? Where the fuck do you work?”

Chase grabs me by the arm and shoves me into a corner. “You can’t go around blasting doctors like that. He’s being treated like a VIP, for Christ’s sake. They have a team of doctors working on him.”

“And yet he’s still unconscious. Not really a strong team,” I growl.

“You need to back the hell off, Sam, and remember I work here. I get that you’re upset?—”

“Upset?” I let out an incredulous laugh and pull away from him. “I am fucking shattered, Chase. Completely shattered. And I need for somebody in this goddamn place to step up and save the man I love.”

“You need to trust the people who are working hard to help him. And even though you’re my brother and an NFL star, you’re still not immediate family, so you’re not going to get news directly. My advice is to stick close to Allie and his dad. They’ll be the ones getting the updates while I’m gone. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Do you think I can see him?”

Chase bites down on his lower lip and looks at his watch. “I can take you to him. You can only stay a minute, though. It’s against the rules, but I know someone who can let us in.”

“Fine. Just please take me to him.”

We take the elevator up to the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit and Chase stops at the nurses’ station. A pretty girl smiles at him and I’m hit with a flash of recognition.

It’s Rae, the nurse who was with us the night Chase got his new heart.

He leans in to whisper something to her and she nods.

She walks around the desk and waves us toward her. Nobody else seems to be paying attention. We follow her into a private corridor.

“Mr. Scott is a VIP, so we have him sectioned off but still close enough where the CVICU nurses can get to him quickly.” She gives me a pointed look. “I’m going to get some coffee, and when I get back you had better not be here.”

I nod, staring at Brixton lying on the bed from my spot in the doorway. Chase claps me on the back. “I’m going to leave you. But I’ll be back if I hear anything.”

“Thanks,” I say without turning around.

A whisper of a chill hits my skin. I take a few steps inside the room.

It’s nice. Reminds me of the room Chase was in a couple of years ago. Much homier than the typical rooms.

But the soothing décor doesn’t do a damn thing to ease the ache in my ears from the

blaring monitors. He's hooked up to so much machinery right now that's keeping him alive. It scares me because I know without those machines, he'd be gone.

Maybe he already is.

"No," I grunt. "Shut the fuck up. Don't even think that."

I walk to the side of the bed. His head tilts to the side, his dark hair hanging over one eye as it usually does. I smooth it away from his pale skin, then trail my fingertips down the side of his strong jaw. A sob struggles to get through the deep ache in my chest but I swallow it down.

I can't let it out. If I do, I'll be giving in to the despair and right now, I need to channel every positive thought and feeling I can find in me.

Maybe if he can feel me here...

I slip one hand underneath his and lace my fingers with his cold ones, careful not to disturb the IV.

"I was such a fucking idiot for letting you leave like that," I whisper. "I didn't mean anything I said to you. I was scared of how strong my feelings were and...and..."

My voice cuts out and I clear my throat.

"I didn't trust you with my heart and I'm sorry. You own it, Brixton. Only you."

I stare at his face. He doesn't make a move. No hand squeeze, no fluttering eyelids.

Nothing.

“I love you. I should have been strong enough to say the words. I’ll never miss the chance again if you just...” My throat tightens, my eyes stinging. “If you just wake up.”

I dip my head and graze his lips with mine. Then I take my crutches, swing myself around, and leave the room, the beeping sounds reverberating between my ears.

A few minutes later, the elevator door pings and I hobble off and walk in the direction of the lobby waiting room. More people swarm the place. Brixton’s bandmates huddle together with their manager and agent. A bunch of guys in suits sit in another corner on their phones. Allie rocks Julianna in her arms, Martin sitting next to them, staring blankly at the tiled floor. Cops and security line each entrance, inside and outside.

I turn my head to the swarms of people now gathered outside. There are so many more than there were when we got here. More flowers, posters, and candles fill the empty ground space.

With a resigned breath, I stand against the wall facing the courtyard. A poster of Brixton stares back at me with that cocky, sexy smile I love so much.

“Sam. ”

I jump out of my thoughts and twist to see my parents. Mom reaches for me and I fall into her arms.

“Have you heard anything?” Dad asks. “Did they catch the person who did this?”

I shake my head. “No, the cops are still looking for leads. It was a clean hit. I just came from his room, but...nothing. How did you know to come?”

“Jack called us.” Mom pulls away, her eyes sad. “Sam, I’m so sorry about what happened at the house that night. I feel awful. I never meant for him to overhear. And we certainly didn’t want to hurt either of you.”

“You know how much I love you guys, right?” I lean back against a wall to take the pressure off my good leg for a minute.

“Of course,” Dad says.

“I value your opinions and listen to your advice. But I’m a grown man. I can make my own decisions. Sometimes I think you forget that. We went through something really traumatic with Chase and that only made you hold on to me tighter. I let it happen, though, so I blame myself.”

“Sweetie,” Mom starts but I put up a hand.

“Let me finish. I let myself get sucked into your idea that Brixton wasn’t good for me because I was afraid that I’d get hurt. But it’s always risky when you realize you’ve fallen in love with someone, no matter who they are. There’s always a chance you’ll get hurt. And I ended up hurting him. Badly. And now I don’t know if I can ever make up for it.”

Dad squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sorry, son.”

I let out a shaky breath. “He’s everything to me. And I know you think it happened fast, but to be honest, it really didn’t. It started a long time ago, and I pray to God that it’s not even close to ending.”

“We want that for you, sweetie,” Mom says. “So badly.”

Behind Mom, Allie slowly approaches. After I do a quick introduction, she asks if I

want to go back to the CVICU with her. “I’ll make sure you get in.”

“Definitely.”

I limp back to the elevators with her, silent prayers and pleas looping through my mind.

We step into the hallway and make our way back to his room.

“Have you heard anything?” I ask. “The doctors are a little pissed at me because I might have told them they’re not doing their job?—”

The rest of my words are swallowed by a piercing alarm.

Allie grabs onto my arm and my heart damn near stops.

A group of nurses rush past us.

They’re heading straight for the VIP section.

A flash of white blasts by.

Dr. Rajan.

Dread washes over me like a crushing wave, the memory of our last words crashing into me like a runaway train into a brick wall.

No, God. Don’t take him. Just give us one more chance, please...

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Chapter 36

Brixton

“ I ’m so proud of you, Brix. And I miss the shit out of you. But it’s not your time yet. You’ve got really important things to do...you need to keep kicking ass on stage and get your career back on track.” Davis smiles. “Take your head out of your ass and fix your life because it’s a damn good one.”

“I know,” I say to Davis. “I will. And I miss the shit out of you, too.”

“I’ll always be watching over you guys. Take care of my girls for me.”

“I will,” I say. “I love you.”

Bleeping sounds scrape away at my subconscious, nudging me out of a deep sleep. I open my eyes a crack. The lights are dim but my head screams with a pounding ache. I try to wiggle my fingers and toes but they don’t respond.

They’re still asleep, I guess.

Where the fuck am I?

I open my eyes wider then snap them closed.

Why the hell am I surrounded by a bunch of strangers ?

I try to shift and yelp at the scorching pain that radiates through my left side.

“Don’t move, Mr. Scott. You need to stay still.”

The female voice is soothing and I float toward it...until she turns around and yells, “Dr. Rajan! You need to get in here now!”

She’s panicking.

That can’t be good.

“Why do I need to stay still? Where am I?”

My mouth is drier than a camel’s ass right now, so the words are barely recognizable, even to me.

A tall guy in a white coat with dark hair and glasses rushes into the room and jogs over to my bed. He immediately checks the monitors and the papers flowing out of them. Then he turns back to me with a confused look on his face.

The pain slices into me again and I let out a howl. “Fuck, what happened?”

“You were shot,” the doctor says, his eyebrows knitted together. “Do you remember anything about it?”

“Oh, shit,” I mumble, my mind stumbling back to those seconds in the parking garage. “Yeah. I was heading into the hospital and this black truck stopped right in front of me. Window goes down, gun comes out firing.”

I let out a shuddering breath, unease grabbing my by the throat.

“I’m not dead.”

“No, thank God.”

I solely twist my head to the side. “Sam?”

His face is pale, eyes red. He pushes past the nurses and limps over to my bedside with his crutches and takes my hand before bringing it to his lips. “You fucking scared me to death. Me and the rest of the world waiting outside for good news.”

“I honestly was doubtful we’d have any to give.” The nurse looks between us, her mouth open, head shaking. “This whole thing is crazy,” she murmurs. “His pressure dropped again, so I ran in when the alarm sounded. I was afraid he was going to code, and just as I was about to hit the alert button, everything suddenly stabilized for the first time since he arrived post-surgery. I checked the readings to be sure, and then he just woke up, after all those hours. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“How do you feel?” The dark-haired doctor asks me.

“Like I was shredded by a few bullets.” I try to manage a smile but it fucking hurts like hell to move even my mouth muscles.

“Makes sense,” the doctor says. “That definitely happened. It’ll be a long recovery, but you made it through the critical point.”

“He’s a stubborn ass,” Sam says. “He wouldn’t have quit so easily.”

“I shouldn’t have quit on you, either,” I say, looking up at him. “I didn’t fight hard enough.”

“Luckily, you’ll have plenty of more chances to fight me on anything you want.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

He gives my hand a squeeze.

I see the nurse smile out of the corner of my eye.

“So it is true,” she says with a conspiratorial smile. “I knew all along it wasn’t just a publicity stunt.”

“Nope, this shit is real,” I say, winking at her.

“Thank God you’re awake,” Allie cries out, rushing into the room and over to me. She drops a kiss on my forehead then looks at the doctor. “Is he going to be okay? This is a good sign, right?”

“It is good news, indeed.” The doctor smiles. “Now, I don’t want to interrupt this very emotional reunion, but I have to examine our wonder patient.”

Allie and Sam walk out into the hallway and loiter in the doorway as the nurses and doctor check every possible one of my vitals.

“I’m in a lot of pain. You guys got any of the good stuff?” I ask, wincing when I move my left arm. The nurse nods and rushes out of the room. A few minutes, she’s back with injectable pain meds that she pushes into my IV line.

“That should give you some relief,” she says, patting my right arm.

“It truly is an incredible recovery,” Dr. Rajan says as he leans down to flash a penlight into my eyes. I recoil, the brightness temporarily blinding me. “You were very lucky because although the bullet damaged your heart, it didn’t hit any other major organs, vessels, or arteries.”

“Who did it?” I ask, my brain fogging up from whatever drugs they just pumped into my IV to call up the memory of those horrific seconds. “Did the cops catch them?”

“We don’t have any information on the shooter, but the police will be in at some point to take your statement. There’s a lot of pressure to find who was responsible and they won’t rest until they do.”

A few minutes later, the doctor and nurses leave. Allie and Sam rush back inside.

Allie runs a hand down the side of my face. “There are so many people who care about you, B. You have to know that. I think all of Oakland is outside the hospital right now. And the waiting room is full of people who love you, people who are your family. You always had a family. You were just too stubborn to let them in.”

She pauses and exchanges a look with Sam over me. “Your dad is here, too. He’s downstairs with Jules but I just texted him to let him know you’re awake.” A smile lifts her lips. “He wants to see you, sweetie. I think he?— ”

“I don’t care.” My voice sounds thick, my tongue heavy.

“B, you just had a brush with death. I don’t know if you’re thinking clearly right now,” she says. “Let him see you. Take the chance to make things right. Be the bigger person here.”

The drugs are definitely having an effect. But I’m lucid enough to know that I don’t want to see my father.

“He’s poison,” I mumble through the wads of imaginary cotton in my mouth. “I don’t want that in my life. And great that he’s backpedaling now that I almost died. If I wasn’t on the brink of death, he wouldn’t have come. If he wants to redeem his black soul, he’s gonna have to find another way to do it. I’m done.”

“Don’t think that I’ve forgotten about that wiseass crack you made back at my apartment,” Sam says, holding my hand close to his lips the next night. The sky outside of my window has turned into a dark, dusky blue.

I’ve graduated to a level below the ICU where I’m in a VIP recovery wing.

And thankfully, the pain is about a five instead of a nine.

God bless those nurses and their magic needles of good stuff.

I furrow my brow. “You can narrow it down to one?”

“The only one that stung.” Sam grins. “That bullshit you spewed about Travis Kelce. You remember?”

“Ah,” I say, chuckling. “You didn’t like that, did you? I was banking on that.”

“You know it’s a load of crap. I’m a hundred times better than he is.” He pauses, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Although, he does have Taylor. That ups his cred.”

“You’ve got me to up your cred. ”

“Do I?” Sam cocks his head to the side. “She’s pretty huge.”

I snort. “Please. I’m way hotter.”

“Maybe so, but she wrote a song about him and she’s worth a shit ton more than you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“No, it’s confirmed. I googled.”

“Whatever. I’m way better arm candy.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” He waggles his eyebrows at me.

“So sensitive,” I say with a smirk. “What’s the matter? You can’t take a joke?”

“Okay, pot. Or do you want to be the kettle?” Sam leans forward, a serious expression clouding his face. “It was a dickhead thing to say, but I said some dumb stuff too.”

“Yep, like how I need to heal on my own. Cold, dude. Ice fucking cold.”

Sam sighs and drops his eyes. “I didn’t mean any of it. I was just scared to fall in love with you, that maybe your feelings weren’t the same as mine.”

A lump lodges itself in my throat, goosebumps pebbling my skin. “And what about now? Are you still scared?”

He said love.

Does he love me?

Sam looks back at me. “No, I’m not. I decided I didn’t care about the risk. Being with you would be worth it.”

“I shouldn’t have left your apartment. I should have told you the truth.” I take a deep breath. “That I didn’t want to lose you to Jack or anyone else. And that I love you.” A smile lifts my lips. “I think I have ever since you attacked the guy who stabbed me that night in the hospital.”

A light breaks over Sam's face. "I've loved you since that night in the chapel two years ago," he murmurs. "And I always knew we'd find each other again."

"This time, I won't let go."

"Me either."

A knock at the door interrupts the moment and one of the nurses opens the door. A cop follows her into the room.

"Don't take too long. He isn't up to a lot of questions," she warns before checking my vitals again. They really have been all over me since I woke up. Seems like someone is in here every fifteen minutes for some test or reading or to change my IV.

The cop walks toward the bed. "Mr. Scott," he says. "I want to find the people responsible for the shooting, but we're really lacking on leads. There weren't people in the parking garage, and the license plate of their truck was covered."

I grit my teeth. "Security couldn't pull up any images at all? That's fucking bullshit. So this person is just gonna get away with attempted murder?"

"We're going to keep on it. But it's not looking great so far. So anything you can remember, as small as it might be, can help us."

I go through those minutes again in my mind but I still come up blank as I fist the bedsheet.

Once the cop leaves, I lean back against the pillows. "Who the hell could it have been?"

"Oh, like there's a shortage of people who want to make you suffer?" Sam quips. He

gets up and walks over to the window. “I don’t think the shooter is down there, that’s for sure.”

“Down where?”

“The front of the place is swarming with your adoring public.” Sam sticks his thumb at the window. “They’d tear the shooter to shreds in a hot second.”

“I need to see them.” I start to sit up but fuck, it burns. My entire chest is in flames.

“No. Don’t move. You shouldn’t get out of bed.”

“Yes, I can. Help me up,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Jesus, could you be any more stubborn?” Sam rolls his eyes and stabs the nurse’s button. “You’re not moving unless the nurse says it’s okay.”

The nurse rushes in. “What’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

“Nah,” I lie, because I’m in fucking agony. “But my boyfriend here thinks I need permission to get up and walk over to the window. There are lots of people down there. And I want them to see for themselves that I’m good.”

A smile plays at her lips. “I’m sure they’d really like that. But you shouldn’t move.”

“But I could move if I was careful, right? Come on, I accept full responsibility. I’ll sign a napkin or whatever.”

She wrings her hands together and bites her lip for a long minute. “Okay. We’ll take it very, very slowly.”

“I promise.”

They help me out of the bed and walk me over to the window after disconnecting me from the machines and IV bags. My legs feel like limp spaghetti noodles, buckling as I take my first step. I cling to Sam.

“Bad idea,” Sam says. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“I’d normally love to hear you say those words to me. But save them for another time because I’m gonna get to that window.”

We finally get there. Feels like forever has passed and darkness dips lower in the sky. Sam holds me against him as the nurse works the window open. Seems like there are thousands of tiny flickering candles lighting up the grounds.

The nurse gets the window open and positions me in front of it.

The cheers from the crowd below ring out as I come into view. The screams are deafening. People flood the perimeter of the hospital for as far as my eyes can see.

“We love you, Brixton,” someone yells.

The rest of the horde goes nuts.

It’s the best feeling...next to hearing Sam say he loves me.

A smile stretches across my lips. “I love you, too,” I murmur, casting a glance at Sam.

He grins back. His dark eyes glow with emotion, his heavy stare confirming that I’m the center of his world. I’ve never felt so secure, so protected, and so complete.

Then I feel it. The thing I've wanted most for as long as I can remember suddenly creeps through my insides and lights up every cell.

Happiness.

And now that I have it, I'm never letting it go.

Chapter 37

Brixton

“Turn it up,” I say to Sofia, hovering over her shoulder to watch the breaking news on her laptop monitor. Sam sits in a chair next to her, leaning forward, his eyes glued to the screen.

It’s been two weeks since I was released from the hospital. Two fucking weeks and the cops have absolutely nothing on the shooter. I hired investigators who came up empty, too. It’s like that damn truck followed me into the parking garage, made the hit, and then disappeared into thin air.

But last night I got a call from the chief of the Oakland Police Department because there was a break in the case. Turns out, the girlfriend of the guy I put in the hospital overheard the assbag bragging about the hit and flipped the fuck out. He beat her pretty bad to keep her quiet. Smart girl decided she wanted out of that cesspool of white trash and went to the cops. She’s in protective custody now and said she’d testify against the guy.

She also happened to leak a few other details about the motorcycle club’s criminal dealings other than the attempted hit on me, so of course, the cops are salivating over using her as a witness in plenty of other unsolved cases against the club.

Sofia hits the volume button on her laptop so we can hear it more clearly.

“According to sources, the accused in the Mercy Hospital shooting of rock star

Brixton Scott has been identified after two weeks of investigating. The whistleblower, Emme Madsen, is the girlfriend of the accused and brought her story to the police last night after she was attacked and beaten by her boyfriend outside of a bar in downtown Oakland. Per an anonymous tip, the accused, Tommy Horton, was caught trying to skip the border late yesterday afternoon and is now being held without bail.”

“She’s fucked, no?” Sofia asks. “I mean, she’ll never survive if those biker guys have anything to say about it.”

“The police chief told me the FBI is going to take over because a lot of the other crimes are intrastate. They have jurisdiction and plenty of cash. They’ll do everything they can to keep her safe.” I straighten up slowly. My arm is still in a sling so my movements are limited, not that it stops me and Sam from getting in our daily “workouts.”

“You’re impervious to death. Kind of like cockroaches.”

I make a face at him. “Never been compared to a roach before.”

“Maybe not to your face,” he says slyly. Then Sam springs out of the chair and wraps his arms around me. “I hope when that dickhead gets sent to gen pop at Crescent City Prison, they tear his fucking balls off and choke him with them. ”

Sofia gasps and looks up at Sam. “Wow, so you do have a dark side.”

“You have no idea,” he says.

“Yeah, and it’s not my influence, either,” I pipe in, laughing until I look toward the front door of Play It Forward.

The smile fades from my face.

My fingers clench the edge of the desk.

Sam rests a hand on the small of my back, but I don't need protection or shielding.

Not anymore.

My father walks into Play It Forward, twisting his head left and right, taking in all of the activity. I narrow my eyes, my lips twisting when he finally looks straight at us.

He takes a few tentative steps in the direction of the reception desk, his gaze latched onto my cold one. His keys jingle as he twists them between his fingers, apprehension scrawled across his lined face.

"You okay?" Sam murmurs.

I take in a sharp breath. "Yes." Then I walk around to the front of the reception desk, my back stiff.

"There's no reason for you to be here right now," I say.

His eyes drop to the sling. "I knew from Allie that you were doing better, but I wanted to see for myself."

"Okay, you've seen. I'm good. Now leave."

He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "I understand why you don't want to see me."

"Good, because if I had to explain it to you again, that would be really fucking sad."

Anger bubbles in my veins, my one good fist tingling with all of the reasons why it needs to crack against his jaw and knock him the fuck out.

“Please, Brixton. I need you to hear me out.”

“You had a lot of years when I was ready and willing to listen. But the shit you spewed was poison. Now I’m supposed to open my ears? Because you’re ready? Fuck that.”

I push past him and stalk toward the door. I shove it open with my good shoulder and walk outside, pacing along the sidewalk like my feet are on hot coals.

He follows me outside. “I was a fucking horrible father to you.”

I spin on my heel, lasering him with a glare. “Fucking A right, you were. And now that you’re here, asking me to listen to whatever bullshit you feel the need to say, I’m just supposed to let you?”

“I’m so sorry, Brixton. There’s no excuse for the way I’ve behaved. I can’t justify it, no matter how devastated I was about your mother’s death. And I hate myself for it. I just...I couldn’t let it go. I tried. But every time I looked at you...”

His voice trails off.

“You don’t have to worry about that ever again,” I snarl.

“I’ve been going to therapy,” he blurts.

“A little late in the game, huh, Pops?” I tug at my hair and continue pacing. “It’s only been about twenty-five years. What the fuck jolted you?”

“Nearly losing you,” he says. “I know you won’t believe it, but?—”

“You lost Mom and Davis and you still didn’t give a flying fuck about me. So why should I believe that almost losing me would make you realize what a fucking raging asshole you are?”

I turn and creep toward him, my voice shaking. “Is this just some bullshit exercise from your therapist? Some sort of 12-Step program or something? Because there’s no redemption for what you did. None.”

My father hangs his head. “I know. And I also know I don’t deserve another chance. I didn’t come here because my therapist wants me to reconnect with you. I’m trying to make myself better.”

Damn if those words don’t resonate.

“I said some horrible things a couple of weeks ago. I was angry, but not at you. I’ve been angry with myself all this time and I lashed out because I couldn’t handle it. I needed to drag someone down with me...and you were there. And my God, I wish I hadn’t spoken those words. I wish with everything in me that I could take them back.”

“I was angry that you came to the hospital when you thought I might die because all those other times, over my entire life, you didn’t care at all,” I say. “So now you decide that you didn’t want your soul stained with the rejection of your only living son? Too bad. That’ll be your demon to battle. I’m finished battling mine.”

But then I slant a glance back at Sam who just appeared in the window and remember.

I don’t need to hang on to the anger anymore.

I don't want to hang onto it.

It's been a big, dark, toxic cloud over my life for too many years, and it finally dissipated when I woke up from the shooting.

I stood up to those demons and told them to fuck off.

Taking a deep breath, I look at my father's crestfallen expression.

As if he really believed I was just going to forgive him for a lifetime of hurt.

"I've looked for your approval for my whole life. I thought I'd never be deserving of love because of the blatant ways you rejected me. I've had to deal with intimacy issues and survivor's guilt and a whole boatload of other crap because the one person who should have loved me and protected me no matter what kicked me to the curb like I was trash. You were never there for me. Ever. And I won't ever allow you to cast a shadow over my life again."

I walk toward the revolving glass door, then turn one final time. "We share a family. We have Allie and Jules. I don't plan to run from events because we'll both be there together. I won't hide from you. But I'll tell you right now that civility is the best you'll ever get from me. And to be honest, it's a very generous offer, considering the hell I had to go through as your son."

He drops his head, his shoulders slumping. "I understand. And I don't blame you. Thank you for listening, and...be well."

Then he turns and slowly walks down the street, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

Sam bursts out the door, his eyes wide with alarm. "What happened? What did he say?"

I shrug. “He wanted to make amends. But I’m not on the same page.”

Sam opens his mouth to say something then closes it. “Do you feel good about the way you handled it?”

“Nope. I hate the way I handled it. It fucking kills me to not have a relationship with my father. But he’s a constant reminder of the pain I lived with from the day I was born. Maybe one day I’ll be able to find a way to forgive him. But it’s definitely not today.”

Sam hugs me close. “I love you, and I’ll always stand by you.”

I breathe in the fresh, clean scent of Chanel Bleu, my favorite cologne of his. “I know. But you think I’ll regret this, don’t you?”

He pauses for a second before nodding. “I do. But I also know you, of all people, need to do things in your own time.”

I lean my forehead against his. “I have everything I’ll ever need, right here, right now. ”

It stings, what I just did. Sending my father away, rejecting his attempt at reconciliation.

My story may not have a picture perfect ending with all loose ends tied up with a pretty red bow. Sometimes there just aren’t any resolutions to be had.

But it’s my story.

And I’m stronger now with Sam at my side and I’ll never let anyone take over the writing of it again.

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brIXTON - ONE YEAR LATER

“ Y ou look so nervous,” Mande Hartley says with a conspiratorial smile lifting her lips. She gives my arm a squeeze. “There are a lot of people out there waiting for you to walk on that stage for your opening night.”

I grin back at her. “Eh, crowds don’t intimidate me. Only one person out there matters.”

It’s been a year since Sam and I collided into each other’s lives for the second time. I still can’t believe everything that’s happened since that night in the bar. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to remember that I’m actually a co-habitant in this blissful bubble we’ve created.

I moved into his apartment in Oakland after the shooting. He wanted to keep me close while I healed, and then he wouldn’t let me leave.

Not that I tried.

We’ve been inseparable ever since then.

I went to every one of his games once he was cleared to play and cheered the loudest. And he was with me for every recording session with the guys. We took road trips up and down the California coast to record new tracks from our album and made pit stops along the way at different hospitals to cheer up the kids with some music and fun. Between Chase and the label, we made connections with a bunch of hospitals in the state and arranged for lots of surprise drop-ins.

I can't get enough of the feeling it brings me to put smiles on these kids' faces. It's incredible to be able to give them even just a little bit of happiness and a memory they'll cherish for as long as they can.

I run my fingers through my hair and mess it up. My signature just-fucked look.

Mandee paces the floor behind me, and I chuckle.

"You sure you're not going up there?"

She laughs nervously, wringing her hands together when the door opens. Sam, Chase, and Bill walk into the dressing room, all smiles.

After my brush with death, we had a whole come to Jesus moment. I told them I loved their son and that even though I may have been a train wreck before him, there was no way I was gonna make the same mistakes again. And it took time for them to trust, which I get.

And now, they practically run my fan club. It's nice to feel like part of their family. It does suck that I feel more comfortable with people I've only known for a short time than with my own father, but we all make choices. Maybe someday, my father and I will reconcile. We've seen each other over the past year, every few months at Allie's for some occasion or other. It's not comfortable, but it's not horrible either. Each time gets easier and Sam tries too. Deep down, I know he wants me to rekindle something with my dad because his own relationship with his father is so special to him. He wants that for me, too.

Maybe someday.

My breath hitches when I catch Sam's eye in the mirror. He's dressed in all black, and with his dark hair, bronze skin, and heated gaze, he makes me want to strip down

and bend over the arm of the couch.

We exchange a secret smile and I know he's thinking the exact same thing.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Yep."

There's a knock at the door and Tyler pokes his head inside. "It's time." Then he winks at me. "Let's roll."

I give him a little nod and fix the sides of my black shirt.

"Are there enough holes in your jeans?" Sam asks me, staring at my legs.

"Easy access for later," I murmur so only he can hear me.

Sam's dad shakes my hand and brings me in for a quick hug when I walk out. Mande's eyes are wet with tears. I lace my fingers with Sam's and walk with him backstage. There's a chair set up right behind the curtain. Mande and Bill wave, and Ben is waiting to escort them to their seats in the front row. They don't usually stay close to the stage, but tonight is a special night.

Lane swoops down on us. "Every fucking song, bro. I can't believe it!"

Tonight is the opening show for the Unbreakable tour, and four songs off our new album are sitting at the top of the charts. It's unheard of for the label, to have a band with that many hits at one time.

But each one we've released has gone viral almost immediately.

It's like each one was sprinkled with some magical music fairy dust.

Okay, maybe that fairy dust shit is the influence of my three-year-old niece, but you get the picture.

Aiden and Dak jog over to us. "Full house. Let's rock this thing."

I guide Sam toward the chair. "Hang here, okay?"

"Why?" He waggles his eyebrows. "I love your ass, but I'd rather see you from the front when you perform."

"Don't worry. I promise your view will be perfect." I give him a wink and Tyler gives me a thumbs up behind Sam's back.

We usually run on stage and slam on our guitars to introduce the first song.

But tonight, I'm doing things a little bit backward.

We run onto the stage and the Sun Arena practically shakes from the screaming.

Best fucking sound I've ever heard.

I grab the microphone off the stand and hold it to my lips.

"What's up, Oakland," I bellow. "This is a really special night for us. You wanna know why?"

Deafening cheers make my ears ring.

"It's because of you. The fans who made our music fucking rocket. And tonight we

wanna sing you all a little song called Love-Hate.” I smile when the crowd goes absolutely fucking nuts. “My boyfriend Sam Hartley was the inspiration for this song. And you guys made it a number one hit!”

The music erupts around us, sucking us deep into the moment. And like always, the words make my heart dance and sing just as hard and just as loud as I do into the mic.

Couldn't look you in the face or listen to your voice

Didn't like the words you said, would have left given the choice

But something shifted, don't know how or when

Now I am falling very hard for you my friend

From hate to want, loathe to desire

You set my heart on fire

Never knew that love could be so real

From the anger to the passion I now feel

It knocked me over, I am upside down

Who knew something that started bad could turn around?

Everything you did would make me mad

Suddenly, missing you makes me sad

The sound of your laugh, the glint in your eye

Your heart has a beauty I can't deny

Now you are all I want, a smile from a frown

you've turned my world upside down

They say there's not much difference between love and hate

To go from one to the other is the magic of fate

No more change, the world seems right

Moved from the darkness to the light

From enemies to lovers, this can't be wrong

We are writing our own love song

Together forever our hearts beat strong

With you is where I belong

I look around at the audience once I stop singing. "What would you say if I brought out the man who sparked those words?"

The audience jumps and claps.

"I thought you might like that." Exchanging a secret smile with Mande and Bill down below, I snap my fingers and a big spotlight hits Sam where he sits. Shock

seeps into his expression. I walk over to him and hold out my hand .

He stands up slowly like he's gonna be Punk'd or something.

“What the hell are you doing?” he hisses.

“Trust me. I know it takes a lot, but it'll be worth it.”

His lips lift. “It has been so far.”

I give his hand a little squeeze and walk him to the center of the stage. I clench my hand tight around the mic. “Three years ago, on the hardest night of my life, I met the guy of my dreams. But my brother had just died and my head was a mess. I resisted playing here at the Sun Arena because of what happened on that night. The last time I played here, I found my guy again. And I knew he'd been sent to me.”

I pause for a second. “But I was stupid. Did a lot of dumb things. I thought I lost him. And then I almost died. I learned a really important lesson after that. Life is so fucking short, you can't waste a second of it.”

I look at Sam. “I know I won't ever again. And tonight, I want to create a new memory, a happy one, right here at the Sun Arena because I believe with my whole heart this guy was always meant to be here with me.”

Dropping to my knee, I stare up at Sam. “I fucking love you, Sam Hartley. I always did and I always will. Will you marry me?”

He falls to his knees in front of me. “Fuck, yes.” And then he grabs me by both sides of my face and crushes his lips to mine.

For a second, I forget that there are hundreds of thousands of people watching us, in

person and online.

Not that I've never been opposed to voyeurism.

We reluctantly pull the slightest bit away from each other, our gazes still locked, the scorching heat of his eyes on me melts my bones.

“You set my heart on fire,” he whispers.

“And with you is where I belong,” I murmur against his lips. “Now and forever.”

I hope you loved reading the red Zone Series as much as I loved writing it! And now Jack Larson is back to get his HEA in PUCK LUST, which will be a spin-off hockey romance series filled with the steamy, spicy, and forbidden vibes we all crave. Age gap, hate to love, broken and brooding hockey player...YUM!!!

Check out chapter one ? —

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:58 am

Jack

I take off down the ice in pursuit of the puck. It's the final minute of the third period, the score tied two-two. My leg muscles burn, a thick stream of sweat icing under my jersey. I dart past Van Buren, one of the opposing forwards on the New York Renegades, to gain possession of the puck in their defensive zone.

"You got something to prove tonight, Larson?" he jeers, rushing at me. "Since you can't stop shitting the bed every time you take the ice?"

I grit my teeth, biting down hard on the plastic mouth guard. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my teammates positioned on the ice, ready for me to make the pass. But that dickhead Van Buren got in my head. Basically because he just said what everyone in the arena is thinking right now.

Do I have something to prove?

Fuck, yeah, I do .

Not that I should. I'm the star fucking forward for the Oakland Raptors. They paid me an insane amount of money to leave New York but it wasn't the money that tempted me.

It was my ex, Sam Hartley, tight end for the Oakland Saints. We'd dated for years and when I left for New York, things fizzled because neither of us was a fan of the long distance thing.

But I never really got over him. Sure, I got over plenty of other guys to help me deal with the loss but none of them ever filled the void. So when I got the offer, I took it, figuring being close to Sam again would fix what had been broken.

Except it didn't. I was too late.

But that's not even the worst part.

I have a clear shot to Masterson. And since Van Buren is practically on top of me, I know I should pass the puck now.

That's what everyone expects.

That I'll make the right move and redeem myself for all the other shitty games I've been playing since the news broke.

But fuck that.

Van Buren's voice rattles my brain. He said what everyone else is thinking. So I don't make the pass.

I turn my gaze toward the line of Renegades barreling toward me. All I have to do is break through the line and score the winning goal.

As I try to deke past the first defender, one of the players shoulder checks me, knocking me off-balance. One of the New York defensemen intercepts it at the blue line and shoots the puck to their center.

Son of a bitch.

I skate toward him, but the wall of players blocks me.

New York takes the shot. The puck sails through the air. Tate, our goalie, makes a diving catch, blocking the puck. But one of the New York centers is waiting to take a quick wrist shot that beats Tate glove-side.

And New York scores with just two seconds left on the clock.

The buzzer blares out.

I drop to my knee on the ice with a deep sigh, pressing my gloved hand to the sides of my helmet. They don't do shit to block out the roaring boos from the crowd.

"Go back to New York. Fuck up their record," an Oakland fan yells.

"Nah, you guys keep him. Let him keep sucking ass out here!"

I get up from the ice without bothering to look at the assholes harassing me. I deserve it. Shoulders slumping, I skate toward the edge of the ice, trying in vain to block out the annoying as fuck voices swarming my ears.

My nerves stretch a little bit more when I pass the Renegades celebrating their win. And judging by the huge shit eating grin on Van Buren's face, it wasn't just a win against Oakland that they're celebrating. It's beating me. I was a fucking star on that team. I owned the ice at Madison Square Garden. The guys were rightfully pissed when I decided to leave. I'd taken them to the championships our last season together and the hope was that we'd make it to the Stanley Cup finals this season.

Then I signed with Oakland.

And if it wasn't bad enough that I was leaving New York, going to our biggest rival was like forcing them all to eat shit pie and ask for seconds.

The worst betrayal ever.

New York fans hate me, my old teammates hate me, and I can't seem to get my fucking head on straight. Tonight, I took a chance to claw myself out of the rut I created, but goddamn, was it a stupid one. And it cost us the game.

I can just predict the news headlines.

Except they'll all be wrong.

Because nobody knows the real reason behind my half-assed playing.

I've tried for weeks to get out of my head but the past is back to haunt me.

Just like I always knew it would be.

I just had no idea how far or hard I'd fall when it came knocking.

Coach Enver turns toward me, his bright red face pinched with anger. "My office. Ten minutes."

I nod, not even bothering to make eye contact with the guys because I don't want to be faced with the truth.

They all resent me for signing. I have no love for Oakland and they all think I followed the money.

That's only part true.

Masterson corners me before I can even make it into the locker room.

"Listen, hotshot," Masterson hisses, backing me against the cinderblock wall. "We don't give a fuck that you were a god back in New York. Out here, we don't hang our teammates out to dry because we wanna take the spotlight. That's not how we work

as a team. And if you don't like that, fuck off. Because from what I can see, you're all hype, man. Nothing special about you, except maybe your ex. But even he doesn't wanna be bothered with you now."

Tate shows up and pulls Masterson away from me. "Come on, enough."

But he doesn't look at me.

I fucked him tonight. I fucked them all.

I pull off my helmet and scrape a hand down the front of my face. Masterson stalks through the doors and Tate just shakes his head at me.

How the hell am I supposed to go in there and face them all right now?

Using the sleeve of my jersey, I mop my sweaty forehead, pushing back the hair hanging around my face.

I've got ten minutes before Coach is gonna lash my ass with some of his famous flaming rhetoric. With a look at the double doors leading into the locker room, I head down the dimly lit tunnel, my blade guards thumping against the cement floor.

It'll be at least forty-five minutes before the guys get in their warm-downs and showers. By that time, Coach will hopefully have finished chewing me out and I can get on with the rest of my shitty night.

Alone.

I slink down the darkened corridor, gripping the back of my neck. It doesn't do a damn thing to ease the tension lodged at the base of my skull. I slam my hockey stick against the wall with a loud grunt and immediately regret it.

“Jack,” a female voice calls out.

Fuuuuck.

High heels clack on the floor behind me. “Jack, do you have anything to say about the news about Sam Hartley and Brixton Scott?” she asks breathlessly, stopping right in front of me.

More footsteps follow. Camera shutters snap, flashes pop.

My jaw tenses. And now I’m surrounded.

“No comment,” I hiss.

“I think the people of Oakland want a little more than that,” a male voice says with a smirk curling his lips. “Since you’ve done a great job of destroying their record this season.”

My eyes spit fire at the cocksucker in front of me. “It’s a team sport,” I growl. “There are six of us out there at any one time. The team’s record is the team’s record.”

“Sure seemed like there was an ‘I’ in team tonight,” he continues, fanning the fire he just lit. “Are you going to blame tonight’s loss on the team when it was your decision that cost the Raptors the game?”

Blood rushes between my ears, my fingers wrapping tighter around my stick.

“Excuse me, everyone.”

My head jerks to my left and for a split second, I forget the real reason why there’s a noose wrapped so tight around my neck, why my career is now about eight minutes away from total implosion.

A tall, dark haired guy, about thirty-five, pushes past the press vultures and stops next to me. A powerful whiff of Chanel Bleu fills my lungs and a barrage of X-rated fantasies blow up the sarcastic response I had on deck for the reporter.

I don't know who the hell this guy is but fuck me, I want to grab hold of his thick hair and fist it while I devour his perfect lips.

"I think we're done with questions for tonight. You'll have your chance to talk to the coaches at the press conference later," he says in a voice so smooth, I can almost feel it drizzle over my skin like an erotic balm.

He flashes a smile that temporarily blinds me, it's so bright. Then he takes me by the arm and guides me away from the crowd. A long minute passes before I can find my voice.

I shake off his hand and turn to glare at him even though I really want to fall onto my knees right here in front of him. "I don't know who the hell you are, but I don't need anyone to fight my battles for me."

"Because you were doing such a great job of it yourself," he says, the deep timbre humming against my ear .

"Why don't you go be a knight in shining armor for someone who gives a fuck?" I shoot back. "And don't fucking touch me like that again. I don't need a babysitter."

His lips press together, his deep-set green eyes sparking the kind of hunger that I've closed myself off to since Sam and I ended things. A strand of dark hair falls over one of his eyes and he sweeps it back from his face before taking a step toward me.

His scent clouds the air, choking me with a twisted mixture of desire and disdain.

But the way my skin prickles under his heated stare makes it damn clear which one is

winning out.

He slaps one of his hands against the wall, blocking any escape I may have. My heart thrashes, the electricity crackling in the air between us strong enough to make both of us spontaneously combust.

And then...

“If circumstances were different, trust that you’d be begging me to touch you again.” His lips curl into a knowing smile that makes my bones melt. “And as for who I am, just call me God. Because I’m the only one with the power to save you right now, Larson.”