

THE BROKEN HILL HIGH SERIES
BOOK 1

**BROKEN
HILL
HIGH**

Sheridan Anne

© 2019 Sheridan Anne.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Cover Design by: Sheridan Anne
Photograph: Viktor Solomin
Editing by: Sheridan Anne & Jessie Lynn

Introduction

‘Go live with Nate Ryder,’ they said.

‘Everything will be fine,’ they said.

Are they nuts?

Nate Ryder has been the bane of my existence for the past five years. He’s made it his personal mission to make my life a living hell and now my parents expect me to go and live with the guy for the foreseeable future. No thanks. I’d rather gouge out my eyes with a toothpick than live with him and his little brother, Jesse. Only problem is, they have my parents wrapped around their little fingers, thinking they’re the good little boys they pretend to be.

But I know better, and so does the rest of Broken Hill High.

Nate Ryder is not to be messed with. He’s a bad boy through and through. A bully. A guy who doesn’t care who he has to step on to get what he wants. He’s the devil and he knows it.

Now that devil is my roommate.

I better hold on tight because this is going to be one bumpy ride. One where I can guarantee that I won’t come out the same.

Dive in to the world of Broken Hill High and meet your new favorite bad boy.

This is one wild read you don’t want to miss.

WARNING: The Broken Hill High Series is a four book New Adult Romance filled with LOL moments, teenage angst, and of course, all the swoon worthy moments I know you’re all dying for. This series is recommended for mature readers due to cursing and sexual content. If this offends you, then steer clear of this bad boy romance!

For everyone else, dive in and have fun!

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Author Biography

Other books by Sheridan Anne

Chapter 1

Brooke - So chilled right now! I've been masturbating all afternoon. You should try it one of these days.

I gawk down at my phone. She couldn't possibly mean that.... Right?

Tora – Ummmmm???? What?!

Brooke – God damn it! Stupid autocorrect. I mean menstruating!

Brooke - NO! Menstruating!

Tora – Ahhhhhh.... This doesn't make it any less awkward!

Brooke – FML!!!! M E D I T A T I N G. I've been meditating!

I burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter and have to hold my stomach when it starts to hurt. Holy shit, I love my best friend. Brooke and I have been attached at the hip since we were kids and every day with her just keeps getting better. I couldn't ask for a better best friend, especially in moments like this.

Tora – I've got the worst mental image right now.

Brooke – Shit. I'm never going to live this down.

Tora – Hell to the NO! What are we going tonight?

Within two seconds of me hitting send, my phone lights up with an incoming call. I look down at the caller ID and grin to myself before accepting the call. "How's your afternoon of masturbating been?"

"It was great, thanks," Brooke laughs. "Hit all the right spots."

"You're such a skank," I tell her.

There's rustling on the other end before she yells out. "I know, but you love it."

"What are you doing?" I ask as my eyebrows pull together.

"Sorry," she says a moment later. "I put you on speaker so I could enter the stupid code for your big ass gate."

"What?" I say in excitement. "You're here?"

“Yep,” she says, popping the ‘P’. “Now, hurry up and get your ass dressed. We’re going to a party.” With that, she hangs up the call and I throw my phone down on my bed as a massive smile comes over my face. It’s our last shot at freedom before we go back to school for our final year. We’ve finally made it to senior year and I can’t wait. It’s going to be awesome.

I pull open the doors of my walk-in closet and start rifling through the many options.

I’m still digging when the door of my room flies open and my best friend waltzes in with a massive grin. “You ready yet?” she questions as she falls into my bed and props herself up on her elbows to watch me.

“No,” I groan. “It’s not like you’ve given me a lot of time to prepare. I mean, where the hell is this party, anyway?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” she tells me with a smirk. “Now, hurry up. I want to leave soon.”

I roll my eyes as I grab a black dress off the hanger. I strip out of my jeans and t-shirt and pull the dress over my head before grabbing the closest black heels I can find. A moment later, I stand before my full length mirror and pull my hair out of the elastic. I run my fingers through it, add a little spray, and before I know it, my chestnut hair is absolutely rocking it.

I grab my eyeliner and mascara and lean in close to my mirror to apply it before reaching for my lip gloss. Two minutes later, I’m ready to go.

“How the hell do you get ready so fast?” Brooke grunts at me. “I was standing in front of my mirror for an hour making myself look this good.”

I can’t help but laugh as I step back and take in the whole look. “I can’t believe you’ve known about this for an hour and didn’t say anything,” I grumble as I steal a look at Brooke before turning back to the mirror. “I look damn fine.”

She rolls herself off the bed and comes to stand beside me. “Then it’s a good thing it’s Josh’s party.”

“What? I didn’t know he was having a party?” I ask with wide eyes. I mean, he’s the most popular guy in school. Not to mention his dreamy looks combined with the fact that he’s the captain of the Broken Hill High football team and their quarterback makes him the guy that I’ve been crushing on for

past twelve months. Though, I'm not some cheerleading bimbo who shakes her ass and waves pom poms through the air, which naturally, puts me out of the running for his attention. There are strict rules at Broken Hill High and if you're caught straying, then you better watch out.

Though, after last week's party when he kissed me, that thought is slowly beginning to change. Maybe I do have a shot with the quarterback, but then, the kiss wasn't the best.

Brooke grins at me through the mirror as though she just handed me the best night of my life. "He posted it on Facebook a few hours ago. You can thank me later," she says with a wink before grabbing my keys off my bedside table and launching them at me. "You're driving."

"Like hell I am," I argue. "You know I can't drive that car."

"Come on," she pouts. "Your daddy didn't buy you that car for it to sit in the garage. You need to think of it as the local whore. It needs to be taken out for a good ride and showed a good time."

"First off. My car is my baby. I love it, but you know just as well as I do that dad only got it so I'd keep my mouth shut about the Russian online sex site, and second, it's a stick. What kind of father doesn't know his daughter can't drive a stick?"

"Ok, ok," she says, raising her hands in surrender. "Tonight is about having fun, not revisiting your daddy issues."

I roll my eyes and huff as I turn back to the mirror before taking in all the angles. "Why don't you drive my car instead?" she says with pleading eyes.

I press my lips together and sigh. "Fine, but when I say it's time to go, it's time to go."

Her whole face brightens before she pulls me into a hard hug and kisses my cheek. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she says. "I'll be back. I have to pee and then we're out of here."

With that, she takes off into my private bathroom, leaving me to study my reflection. I run my hand down my stomach and while the image I'm seeing in the mirror is telling me I have a flat stomach; my head is saying something very different. I let out a breath and try to ignore it. I know

on some level, I'm just being ridiculous, but I can't help that nagging thought inside my head, constantly telling me that I'm not quite thin enough. That I'm not pretty enough. That I'm just not enough.

Brooke comes crashing back into my room and I collect my phone off the bed. "Let's go," she says before dashing out into the hallway. We hurry downstairs and I stop by the kitchen. "Mom?" I call out.

"In here," she yells.

I follow the sound of her voice into the living room where's she's sitting on the edge of her seat, watching the TV with tears streaming down her face. I look at the screen to see her favorite scene in *'The Notebook'* and roll my eyes. "We're heading out," I tell her.

She tears her eyes away from the screen to see Brooke standing beside me. Mom gives her a welcoming smile as she wipes the tears off her face. "Oh, honey, I didn't know you were here. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. R," Brooke grins. "How are you?"

"I'm doing alright," she smiles. "Is there anything I can get you girls before you head out?"

"No, thank you," Brooke says. "We're fine. Can we get you anything?"

I want to roll my eyes at the way my best friend is constantly sucking up to my mom. "I'm alright, dear," Mom laughs before turning to me. "No drinking and I want you home before one or I'll be forced to come out and find you."

I give her a cheesy grin and a salute, making her shake her head in exasperation before turning back to her movie. "You girls are idiots," she tells us with a chuckle.

We laugh as we head back through the kitchen with our heels clicking and echoing through the large house. I make sure to yell over my shoulder. "Love you, mom."

"Get out of here. You're ruining my Ryan Gosling time."

With that, we push through the front door and walk straight past my car. My eyes can't help but linger on the sleek curves and sharp lines of the

sexiest Audi R8 I've ever seen. It's a damn shame I don't know how to drive it.

We walk on past and I slip off my heels before getting into the driver's seat of Brooke's Mercedes, as there's no way I'll be driving this thing with them on.

I start up the engine and listen as it purrs to life before driving around the front of our U-shaped driveway and down through the big metal gates.

We live just two streets away from each other in one of the gated communities in Broken Hill. We've gone to the same private school all our lives, dealing with all the same jocks and cheerleaders along the way.

It's only a short drive to Josh's house and although I've never been here before, it's easy to figure out which place is his due to the hundreds of bodies heading that way. The wide street is littered with all sorts of trust fund baby cars and I have no doubt that tonight is going to be a great night.

We park halfway up the street and get out of the car. Music is heard the second we step out into the fresh air and we get walking with grins on our faces. Brooke and I squish our way through the people standing by the front door and push our way inside. There are bodies everywhere with little red cups scattered on every possible surface. It's exactly what I need for the last Friday night before returning to school.

Brooke's hand clutches onto mine as we weave our way through the bodies. "Drink?" she calls back to me.

I smile and nod, knowing there's no way she'll hear me over the sound of the music.

She continues leading me through the big house until we find the dining table which is filled to the brim with every kind of liquor under the sun. Brooke grabs two red cups from the pile and reaches for the vodka. "Not for me," I tell her. "Just soda."

"No way," she says before going to fill my cup.

I snatch my cup away and go about making my own drink. "I'm the sensible one tonight. I mean, unless your skank ass doesn't want to get home tonight."

"Who said anything about going home?" she laughs. "I'm starting

senior year with a bang.”

“You mean you’re starting senior year by getting banged.”

A grin rips across her face as she continues filling up her cup before clinking it against mine. “One could only be so lucky,” she tells me moments before a familiar set of squeals is heard behind us.

I twirl around to see Bec and Courtney, two of our best friends, both already drunk off their asses. “You guys made it,” Bec says as she pulls me in for a hug before leaning over to Brooke and doing the same.

“Of course, we made it,” I laugh. “As if we were going to miss this.”

“I know,” Courtney says with a sly grin. “I’ve already snooped around. This place is awesome, but I can’t figure out which is his room.”

“You’re probably wasting your time. I’m sure it would be locked,” I tell her as my eyes start sweeping around the room in search for that one particular footballer who can offer me the juiciness of his good looks.

“Hey,” Courtney says, pointing her finger into my chest. “Don’t kill my vibe like that.”

“Alright, alright,” I laugh. “Keep your panties on.”

I turn back to the table to finish filling my cup when the bottle I’m holding is plucked straight out of my hand. My head snaps up. “Hey, what do you think -” Shit.

I look into the eyes of none other than Nate Ryder standing next to his best friend Parker. He’s the boy I grew up with. The boy who’s no longer a boy, but a man. I mean, he’s drop dead gorgeous in all the right ways. Tall? Check. Muscled? Check. Deep, smoldering eyes that could burn a woman’s underwear right off her body? Check. Not to mention, he’s the school bad boy. The guy you’d never bring home to mommy and daddy.

Our parents have been friends since they were teenagers, so Nate and his younger brother Jesse have been thrown in my face since the day I was born. It wasn’t always so bad. We used to be pretty good friends, up until his balls dropped and being an asshole became his MO. I guess that happened around the same time that I grew boobies and stopped kicking the ball around with him.

The girls hush into silence around me, waiting to see what Nate does as his eyes narrow into slits on me. My heart begins to race and my palms begin to sweat. It's then I notice not only my friends have grown quiet, but everyone in the room. That's just what happens when Nate is around, he draws the attention of everyone. He's just *that* guy.

It's always a guessing game with him. Is he going to ignore me? Play some ridiculous prank on me? Hell, maybe his goal is to humiliate me so bad that I don't bother showing my face on Monday morning.

"You got a problem?" he says with that signature grin that makes me want to throat punch him. His eyes sparkle with the challenge and I find myself shrinking back from him.

I have two options here. I can either call him on his bullshit which would not go well for me as Nate Ryder does not get called out, especially in front of so many people. Or my other option, ignore him like the plague and save myself the embarrassment of whatever he has planned for me.

I've never been the one to back down. I've got one hell of a backbone, but with Nate, it's just not worth it. Not wanting to pussy out, but also not wanting to declare a war with the designated bad boy, I send him a glare and cross my arms over my chest, silently letting him know exactly what I'm thinking.

His eyes instantly drop down to my boobs and I resist smirking at him. I've got a nice chest, I'm not going to deny it and I can tell by the appreciation in his eyes that he thinks so too, but the way he continues looking up and down my body like I'm a piece of meat has me wanting to launch myself at him, fists and all, but I won't show a weakness. Not in front of him.

Nate's eyes come back to mine and his smirk makes him look like the world's biggest douche bag. He makes a show of reaching across the table for a red cup, making sure his arm grazes across my chest in the process which sends an electric shock straight through me, making me want to throw up, but I won't. Not here. Not now.

He slowly pours himself a drink before placing the bottle back down on the bench, far out of my reach, just as you'd expect of any other asshole. "You just about done?" I question.

His eyes continue to sparkle and I hate that it pulls at something within me. He continues watching me like a predator stalking his prey. "I'll never be done with this," he promises.

I know he's talking about me, rather than the drink. This is the twisted little game he's played with me for years. It's almost as though torturing me gets him hard.

His girlfriend, Ashley, appears beside him and drapes herself over him before taking the drink out of his hand. He throws his arm over her shoulder and she looks up at him before following his gaze over to me.

Ashley scoffs at me, clearly knowing what's going on. I mean, the whole school knows that I'm the girl the bad boy likes to kick around. "Come on," Ashley laughs as she tugs at his waist.

Nate's grin widens as though he's won this round before he takes off with Ashley under his arm.

I let out a breath as Brooke turns to me. "Are you ok?" she questions.

"Yeah," I say, shrugging it off. "I'm used to his shit by now."

She studies me for a moment and decides she likes what she sees. It's true. I've put up with his asshole tendencies for years now. At the beginning, I used to wonder why he'd suddenly turned on me and if I'd done something to piss him off. Now, I don't give a shit. He does his bullshit and it sails right over me like water off a duck's back.

Yes, sometimes it can suck, especially if I've had a bad day, but right now, I'm out having fun with my girls, and Nate Ryder is not even on my radar.

Chapter 2

With our drinks in hand, I follow Brooke around Josh's home with Bec and Courtney right behind me until we manage to steal a couple of guys' chairs. We sit down and people watch for a while before Brooke decides it's time to shake our asses.

I'm more than happy to stay right where I am, but the little minx is not taking no for an answer, which is made clear when she grabs my hand and drags me out onto the dance floor behind her.

The girls and I dance around, shaking our asses and giving it our all when I finally spot him. Josh Henderson. Broken Hill's star quarterback and the most popular guy in the room. He's the guy that every girl wants to be with and every guy in Broken Hill wants to be. It's sick really, the kind of attention he gets, but that's just the way things go around here.

Josh makes his way across the dance floor with practically every cheerleader following him, each of them desperate to be the girl he chooses for the night, though it's not hard to tell why, especially with that floppy golden hair, hazel eyes, and killer body. It's simple. He's absolutely stunning.

His eyes lock on mine and I watch as that familiar smile cuts across his face. He weaves his way through the throng of dancing bodies and reaches me within moments. "Hey, babe," he says as he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls my body hard against him.

"Hi to you, too," I smile up at him as my arms fall around his neck.

He starts dancing with me, and by dancing, I mean, he grinds himself into me while Brooke gives me the thumbs up and a big cheesy grin.

I can't help but feel the stares of all the cheerleaders in the room and feel as though I currently have a major target on my back. After all, Josh is the quarterback and at Broken Hill High, that means he's theirs.

I look up at him and within the blink of an eye, his lips are crushing down on mine with his tongue forcing its way inside my mouth.

I let him kiss me for a bit and I know had I been drinking, I probably would have been enjoying it a little more, but let's face it, just like last week, it's all saliva mixed with the taste of bourbon. It's not his finest hour, but if he was sober right now, I'm sure this moment would be putting stars in my eyes.

Not really feeling it, I pull back and he grins down at me. "Let me get you a drink," he says before releasing my waist and walking away, not bothering to wait for my response. I can't help but feel a little disappointed. In my head, I had made Josh out to be this amazing guy, but the last two weeks is proving otherwise.

"What the hell was that?" Bec squawks beside me.

"I have no clue," I tell her as Brooke starts to laugh.

"Tell me it was better than last week?" she questions.

I scrunch up my face and shake my head. Just like that, the four of us burst out into uncontrollable fits of laughter. "Holy shit," Brooke says, straightening herself up and wiping at the tears in her eyes. "I think I just peed myself."

"You're such an idiot," I tell her over the sound of the music as a slight headache starts to seep in from all the noise and dancing.

She grins back at me. "I'm going to go find the bathroom," she tells me before promptly turning her back and disappearing.

"Shit," I groan after my drunken best friend. I turn to Bec and Courtney. "Can you guys go with her so she doesn't get herself in trouble? I'm going to grab some fresh air."

"No problem," Bec says before they turn and hurry after her.

I turn in the opposite direction and head for the back door, passing a couple practically screwing up against the wall. The second I step out into the fresh air, I take a deep breath, letting the cool air rush into my lungs.

I walk out into the yard and past the massive pool, which even I must admit is pretty damn impressive. I swear, the party must be even bigger out here. There's a massive yard with a bonfire. People are scattered and dancing all around while others sit around the fire, laughing and drinking as they enjoy their night. Even I have to admit that this is one hell of a good party,

even with Nate Ryder hanging around somewhere.

I pull my phone out and quickly check the time. 12:37 am. Hmm, I hadn't realized just how quickly the night was going. Mom is expecting me and Brooke home soon.

I find myself a dark corner and lean up against the brick wall of the house when a set of arms wrap around my waist. I gasp and look up into Josh's hazel eyes. "I knew you'd come looking for me," he murmurs into my ear as his hand travels down to grab my ass.

Just like before, I hardly have a chance to take a breath before he seals his lips to mine with his tongue invading my mouth. Inside, I could mostly handle it as I had the party vibe going on, but right now, I'm tired and I have a headache, and having some guy's tongue halfway down my throat just isn't cutting it.

I turn my head away and he aims his lips for my neck. I mean, this is definitely a much better situation. The way his lips move against my neck has a slight moan slipping out of me. "Yeah, I knew you'd like that," he says as he presses himself against me, letting me feel just how turned on he is. "Why don't we go upstairs for a little more privacy?"

I consider it for the briefest moment before realizing that I don't want to give up my V-card at a party to the drunk quarterback who wouldn't remember it in the morning. Most girls at this party would say I'm insane to pass this up, after all, he's the most popular guy in school, being with him right now would mean setting myself up as Queen B for the whole senior year. I mean, every girl in the school wants to be in my position, and I'm hating myself for not feeling it.

Why can't I just be a whore for one night? Just lose all my morals and have a good time?

I groan before letting him down, hoping this doesn't ruin my chances for another night. "I can't. I have to go."

His hands on my ass tighten as he gets a good squeeze. "Come on, babe," he says. "I'll make it quick."

Ahhhhhhh... Nah. My first time is not going to be a quick, meaningless screw.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I really have to go. Rain check?” Or maybe an actual date and a little effort on your part before you try to get in my pants?

Josh goes to reply when screams coming from behind us steal both our attention. Josh whips around as I twist to look around him, trying to figure out what has people so freaked out.

It only takes a second for me to work it out as Nate’s matte black Camaro comes tearing through the back yard with his best friend, Parker, hanging out the passenger window, banging on the side of the car and egging Nate on. People duck and dodge as they try to get out of his way while others, like me, stand there gawking at the sight.

“Fuck,” Josh grunts as his hands ball into fists at his side. As he watches Nate, it’s clear he’s not impressed, especially as Nate heads for the bonfire, but we all know, there’s nothing that can be done. If it was anyone else, this shit would have been dealt with, but not with Nate.

Nate Ryder does whatever the fuck he wants to do and the way that he doesn’t give a shit about the consequences is what makes him so dangerous.

Nate drives like a maniac but it’s clear he knows exactly what he’s doing behind the wheel, especially when he reaches the bonfire and starts tearing up the grass as he does donuts around it.

People laugh and cheer at his recklessness while Josh turns bright red with anger. It’s no secret that Nate and Josh have never gotten along. Josh is the golden boy while Nate is the complete opposite. Josh goes to step forward, probably to do damage control before he steps back, choosing not to intervene. I have to admit, that one little move by Josh finally proves that maybe he does have a brain inside that head after all. He’d be a fool to try to stop Nate. He’s just going to have to wait him out and hope he and his friends leave before they do any permanent damage.

Nate’s car finally comes to a stop and I cringe at the state of the grass, I mean, there’s hardly any left. Josh is going to have to get this shit sorted before his parents return from wherever it is they’ve gone this week.

Parker stumbles out of the car first and raises both hands in the air before screaming out and putting on a show for all his adoring fans. He

brings his beer bottle to his mouth, finishes what's left, and tosses the bottle towards the fire, though he misses and it smashes against a rock.

Nate, however, gets out of the car, deciding to leave it right there in the middle of the yard. He leans up against the side of it and pulls a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket before pulling one out and lighting it up.

He throws the packet through the open window of his car and walks forward. His eyes lock onto Josh and then down at me before he smirks as Josh turns and disappears inside.

He walks straight past me and I hold my breath, hoping he keeps going, but I'm not that lucky. Nate stops and steps back before smirking down at me. He takes a step forward as he sucks on the end of his cigarette and blows out a puff of smoke, though, I have to give him credit for not blowing it into my face like he did a few weeks ago.

My instincts take over and I step back which puts me right up against the brick wall of the house. Nate follows and pushes right into my personal space with that wicked smirk of his. He lowers his hands to my waist and I pull back as far as the wall will allow.

"Looks like Josh isn't that interested in you after all," he says with a nasty sparkle in his eye as he leans in and presses his body right up against mine. "But don't worry, I'll be more than happy to scratch that itch for you."

I worm my hand up in between us and try my hardest to shove him away. "I wouldn't let you into my bed if you were the last man on earth," I spit. "You're nothing but a pig, Nate."

He laughs to himself before wrapping his arm right around my waist and pulling me hard against him, making a breath escape me. "You fucking love it, babe," he says as he runs his nose up the length of my neck. A moment later, he releases me without warning and I fall back into the brick wall.

He turns his back on me and walks back down to his car as he lifts his dirty cigarette to his mouth before a puff of smoke comes billowing around him and disappears into the night sky. My hands ball into fists at my side while my teeth clench down on one another. I want nothing more than to storm up to him and smack him.

God. I take it all back. Nate Ryder does know how to get a rise out of me. Most of the time, I can control myself, but then there are times like this. It's like he knows when I'm at my weakest and he uses it against me, then BAM, he gets me right where it hurts.

I take a few calming breaths before heading back inside. After all, now I only have a few minutes to find Brooke and drag her ass out of here kicking and screaming.

I find the girls back at the drinks table with Brooke and Bec seeing who can stomach the most shots. "Damn it," I groan to myself as I reach them. "Brooke," I call over the music. "We have to go."

"No way in hell, sister," she sings. "We're doing shots."

"I see that," I tell her. "Now get your stubborn ass outside and into your car before my mother comes down here and makes you."

She throws back one last shot before slamming the little glass down on the table and turning her glassy-eyed gaze on me. "Fine," she groans. "But you better make it worth my while."

"Don't I always?" I grin.

She throws her arms around me and gestures toward the front entrance. "Alright, my fair prince. Take me home and give it to me hard."

"Sure thing," I laugh. "All night long."

I don't know how, but at precisely 12:58 am, I pull into my driveway and manage to get Brooke out of her car and up the driveway before dumping her into my bed.

I pull her heels off and laugh to myself as she promptly falls asleep.

"Is that you, Tori?" my mother calls down the hallway.

I stick my head out as to not wake up Brooke. "Yes," I call back.

"Did you have a good time?" she questions.

"Define good?" I grunt.

"Oh dear," she says. "Tell me all about it in the morning, k? Love you."

"Love you too, mom," I tell her before closing the door and walking

over to my walk-in closet. I rip my dress over my head and get myself into my comfiest pajamas before ducking into my bathroom and washing the makeup off my face. I grab my hair elastic and tie my hair up into a bun before heading to bed.

I lay beside Brooke, wide awake and unable to get myself off to sleep as thoughts of my night continue replaying in my mind. It's like an endless loop. Nate then Josh and repeat.

I mean, how could my last Friday night before senior year be so shitty? All I wanted was to enjoy myself with my girls, and instead, I get stuck with a guy who wants to use me for sex, and an asshole, desperate to make my blood boil.

Lucky me.

With nothing else to do, I reach across to my bedside table and find my Kindle before allowing myself to completely get lost in the world of '*The Mortal Instruments*'.

I don't know when, but eventually, I must fall asleep as I wake up to sunlight streaming through the window and the sound of my parents' hushed conversation in the hallway.

I peel my Kindle off my face and groan as I push myself up out of bed. I slide my Kindle onto my bedside table and replace it with my phone. The screen lights up and I find a few text messages.

Bec – OMG!! You guys should have stayed. BEST NIGHT EVER!!!!

Courtney – Shit, you need to save me from Bec. She's drunk off her face and dry humping that guy from her calculus class.

Courtney – Sorry, Tor... You should probably see this.

Courtney - DOWNLOAD ATTACHMENT

I hit download on the picture and watch as the little circle goes around and around. Then BAM. There he is, Josh Henderson pressed up against the wall with a blonde on her knees and his hand at the back of her head while she goes to town on him, right in the middle of the party.

Damn.

I knew that was way too good to be true.

I study the photo a little closer and take note of the way Josh's eyes are closed in satisfaction as he tunes out all the partiers around him. It also doesn't go unnoticed that none other than Nate Ryder is right there in the background, smirking at the scene before him.

I put my phone back down on the table. There's nothing there that I should be paying attention to. I should just forget about it. For a moment I was on cloud nine thinking that Josh Henderson was actually into me. How wrong was I?

"Where're the pancakes?" Brooke groans from beside me as she squishes her face deeper into her pillows.

"Huh?" I grunt.

"Pancakes," she says. "Your mom always makes us pancakes when I stay the night. I don't smell them."

I start sniffing around and realize she's right. I certainly don't smell any pancakes. "Come on," I say, dragging Brooke up out of bed. "We might have to fend for ourselves today."

"Damn," she grunts, but nonetheless, gets up out of bed. I grab my robe and slip my arms through while Brooke pulls off her dress from last night and grabs a pair of jeans and a shirt out of my closet.

We make our way downstairs and the sound of sniffing and a hushed conversation catches my attention. Brooke and I both stop on the stairs and try to listen in to what's happening in the kitchen, but we get nothing. They're talking way too quietly. "Maybe I should go," Brooke murmurs beside me.

I press my lips together, unsure of what the hell is going on right now. I turn back to Brooke. "Yeah, maybe that's a good idea. I'll text you later."

"Alright," she says before pulling me in for a quick hug.

We walk the rest of the way down the stairs and go our separate ways at the bottom. I watch as Brooke detours past the hallway table and collects her car keys before disappearing out the front door.

I head into the kitchen to find mom sitting up on the kitchen stool in tears while dad hugs her and runs his fingers down her hair trying to soothe her in a rare display of affection.

My eyebrows pull down as I take in the scene before me. “What’s going on?” I question as I slowly walk towards them. I mean, maybe they’ve been fighting again.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were up,” mom says in surprise before swiveling around in her chair to face me. She hastily wipes at her tears and reaches out to pull me in for a hug. “I’m sorry, love. We’ve had some bad news.”

She pulls me back but holds onto my shoulders as dad releases his hold on mom. “It’s your Nanna,” she tells me. “She’s fallen ill again.”

“Oh no,” I gasp with wide eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s cancer, sweetie. They don’t think she’s going to pull through this time.” My bottom lip pouts out as my eyes fill with tears. “I know,” mom soothes before pulling me back into her arms. “Your father and I are going to go be with her,” she tells me.

“But she lives in Australia,” I remind them.

“We know, honey,” mom says, pulling me back once again and offering me the stool beside her. I climb up and she wraps her arm around me. “But she can’t be alone right now. I’d never forgive myself if she passed and she had nobody there by her side. So, we’re flying out tonight,” she explains. “But with your senior year starting on Monday, we’ve decided that you should stay here.”

“What?” I gasp. “You’re going to leave me behind?”

“Don’t think of it like that,” Mom tells me. “You’re going to stay and concentrate on your studies just as your Nanna would want. I don’t want you seeing her so ill, and quite frankly, nor would she.”

I hang my head. I know she’s right, but the fear of never seeing my Nanna again haunts me. I nod my head ever so slightly, letting her know I understand. “I’ve spoken to Trish and Cade,” she tells me, making the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. “They’re happy for you to go and stay with them until we return.”

“What?” I shriek, flying back out of my chair and getting to my feet as I wipe the tears from my eyes. “No way am I staying with them.”

“What’s wrong with staying with them?” my father grunts, finally adding his two cents into the conversation.

“Um..... ever heard of two losers by the names of Nate and Jesse?” I grunt.

“Oh, come on,” Mom says. “Nate and Jesse are lovely boys. You’ll be fine.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right?” I say as the dread starts to seep way down into my bones. There’s no way on God’s green Earth that I’m staying there. It would be never-ending torture from Nate. Day in and day out. Over my dead body. “Why can’t I stay with Brooke?” I question as I start thinking of my options.

“Sweetie,” mom says with sympathy. “You know I love Brooke, but I can’t stand her mother. You know that. That woman would treat you awful, just to get at me for inconveniencing her.”

I let out a sigh. She has a good point. I mean, there’s a reason Brooke sleeps over so much. Her mother is a nasty piece of work.

“Well...,” I say, playing my last card as I give them my puppy dog eyes. “I’m seventeen now. Why can’t I stay by myself? I have a car, I can get myself to school and back every day. I know how to cook. I’ll be alright by myself. I’ll check in every day. Please?” I beg.

Mom looks over at dad who shrugs his shoulder, clearly having absolutely no input on the situation, as usual. “I don’t know, Tori,” mom says.

“Please? I wouldn’t want to put Trish and Cade out like that when I’ll be fine on my own.”

Mom lets out a heavy sigh. “Fine,” she finally says, “But I’ll be getting Trish to pop in every few days to check on you.”

“Deal,” I say as a sigh of relief comes tearing out of me while a smile rips across my face. That was a close one.

Chapter 3

Brooke and I pull up at school first thing on Monday morning. It's our first day of being seniors and I can't be more thrilled. The lot is busy and I find myself looking out at all the bodies shuffling around, trying to make their way up to the front of the school.

Broken Hill High. The only private school in the area, so naturally, it's filled with students whose parents practically fight for their position here. Being the only private school, it means that the board can raise the school fee's and the parents are still going to pay it.

It's filled with every kind of person you'd find at a regular school, only these kids come with the snobby attitude of kids who were raised with money. Just great. It means all the cheerleaders are extra bitchy and the jocks are bigger dickheads than you could possibly imagine.

Welcome to Broken Hill High.

Brooke parks her car beside Courtney's and we grin as both she and Bec step out at the same time. "Hey," they both smile. We meet at the front of the cars before walking up to the school together, each with a coffee in our hands. "I'm so excited," Bec says as she pushes her auburn hair back behind her ear and makes sure it looks perfect for the first day. "We're seniors. Top of the school."

"I know," Brooke laughs. "This place is ours. We're going to dominate this school."

I roll my eyes at their excitement as we head through the huge double doors of the school. I can't help but glance at the groups of people around me. First, my eyes are drawn to the giggling to my right and notice the cheerleaders hovering around their queen's locker. Though from what I can tell perfect little Miss Elle isn't here yet, but when she is, the cheerleaders will all scream and jump up and down with excitement.

Next up, my eyes travel to the group of jocks who are making their way across to them with their letterman jackets, declaring them the biggest

group of losers this school has ever seen.

Then there are the mean girls, who I stay far away from, and of course, the bad boys who tend to hover around the mean girls. Naturally, Nate is in the group of bad boys, though, I don't expect to see any of those guys yet as they'd all be hovering around their cars, smoking or screwing until the final warning bell has rung.

The bad boy group is made up of the five worst guys in the school. Every single one of them completely swoon-worthy with an awful personality. Of course, there's the head of the group, Nate Ryder, aka, the biggest dickhead in Broken Hill, next up, his brother, Jesse, who considers himself to be absolutely hilarious, though, I don't quite agree. Then there's their cousin Maxen who Brooke has a crush on, and finally there are Nate and Jesse's best friends, Parker and Tyson. The perfect band of badasses to stay away from, not unless you want your world rocked followed by a thorough heartbreaking.

These guys are the go-to guys for a good time. You know, if you don't own a cheerleading uniform and want to get a bit nasty between the sheets, then that group of five is the direction you'd be heading. Rumor has it that every single one of them would be a prize, but me? It's not exactly a prize I'm interested in.

My group, we're just the regular kids. We're just normal. I mean, you could say we're kind of popular. If I had to go through and make a popularity chart for the girls in the school, I'd say at the top is the cheerleaders, followed by the mean girls, and then maybe us, despite the way Nate tries to tear me down. For kids who can't make it as a cheerleader and are terrified of the mean girls, they come to us, and naturally, we're more than happy to lend a helping hand.

We pass by my locker first and I stop to dump all my things in it while Brooke darts across the hallway to hers. As I'm finishing up and closing my locker, two arms come down on either side of me, caging me in. "I'm sorry I was an ass the other night," I hear murmured into my ear.

I turn around to find Josh hovering above me with his signature smirk. "You really were an ass," I tell him.

He presses his lips down on mine and without the added push from

the alcohol, I have to admit, it's pretty good. His arms wind around me and he presses me into my locker. "Forgive me," he says.

"I don't know, Josh," I say. "I heard you had a pretty exciting night."

His eyebrows pull down and he looks at me in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

I slide my phone out of my pocket and turn the screen around to face him. He looks down at the picture of him getting his world rocked and grins. "Oh, yeah. I forgot about that," he says. "But what did you expect? You said no and it's not like we're actually dating."

I press my lips together as I consider him. He's right. We're not dating, just making out at random parties. "Fine," I groan.

And just like that, his lips are crushing on mine again.

"Ugh," Brooke says as she saunters over with Bec and Courtney joining her. "Get a room."

With that, Josh pulls back and winks at me before joining the rest of the jocks who are flirting with the cheerleaders.

My eyes follow him as he leaves which is when I notice Elle, the head cheerleader, shooting daggers my way.

Shit. I hadn't even noticed her arriving. Day one and Josh has just put a massive target on my back. Just what I need.

It's common knowledge around here that the cheerleaders do not share their toys, and the football team; well, they are theirs, especially the quarterback.

"Are you sure you want to keep messing around with their quarterback?" Courtney grunts. "Elle looks like she could tear you a new asshole right now."

"It's fine," I say, waving off her concern. "Nothing is going on with me and Josh. It's just a little innocent flirting and a bit of making out."

"Even though he had a blonde getting acquainted with his junk on Friday night?" Brooke grunts.

"As Josh just so kindly reminded me, we're not dating. So, technically he can have whoever the fuck he wants sucking his dick. Hell, he

can even suck a few dicks if he feels that way inclined.”

Brooke gives me a sideways glance, clearly very curious about my blasé attitude. “You sure?” she questions before raising her coffee to her lips.

I roll my eyes and turn to face her better. “Yes, I’m sure. Josh is just fun, and besides, in order to be anything more to him, I’d have to run around the school with a pair of pom-poms, cheering about school spirit, and that’s just not me.”

The girls burst into laughter. “Oh, I can just see it now,” Courtney says. “You’d be the worst cheerleader.”

“Shut up,” I laugh, swatting her shoulder. “Besides, Josh would make an awful boyfriend. He’d be super high maintenance and constantly need his ego stroked.

“Yeah,” Brooke scoffs. “You’ll be stroking more than just his ego.”

I break into snickers knowing just how right she is. I mean, I’ve had a crush on him for the past year, but it’s not super intense. I wouldn’t mind taking it a little further, but only if it meant something. What we’re doing now... I don’t know if it will go any further than this.

The first warning bell sounds, telling us to get our asses to our first class and I watch in amusement as everyone scrams from the hallway. I have Brooke in my first class so we walk together as Bec and Courtney disappear the opposite way down the hallway.

“Have you heard from your parents yet?” Brooke questions as we walk.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “I got a text from mom last night saying they made it there safely, but that’s about it so far. I think it’s the middle of the night over there at the moment so I can’t really check in.”

“Oh,” she sighs. “I’m sure your mom will call after school. I don’t think that woman could go long without checking in on her special little lady.”

“Shut up,” I laugh, but again, she’s right. Mom and I are close. It’s my dad I have the differences with.

He’s a bit of a workaholic and though he works from home, we

hardly ever see him. From the second he wakes up to the moment I turn my light off at night, he's holed up in his office. I mean, sure, he comes out every now and then to eat and mom forces him to take time off on a Sunday, but that's about it really.

I'm almost certain their marriage is suffering because of it, but mom is too proper to let anyone know. She's all about the looks and living the ultimate housewife fantasy.

I can just picture it now. Dad would be sitting at Nanna's dining table with his head stuck in his laptop while the world continues around him. Mom could be making out with some random hot Aussie right in front of him and he wouldn't even notice.

It goes a long way in explaining my car, you know, apart from the whole internet porn thing.

Brooke and I file into our math class while our teacher goes about writing something up on the board. The sounds of the students' chairs scraping across the floor is the only noise I hear for at least thirty full seconds before they all settle into their spots and pull out their notebooks.

Mr. Miller is about to start his lesson when the door opens and Nate saunters in, not giving two shits that he's late and the teacher is glaring at him. He walks past me and smirks as he bumps into the side of my desk and knocks over my coffee.

My hand snaps out as I catch my coffee cup and save myself from being drenched in the yummy goodness while Nate chuckles to himself as he passes.

"Nathaniel Ryder," Mr. Miller calls out. "You're late. I know it's the first day back of your senior year, but I will not accept tardiness to my class. Your break is now over. If it happens again, you will be spending your lunch period with me."

I look back at Nate over my shoulder just in time to watch him salute Mr. Miller with a smirk that has Miller's face turning an impossible shade of red. Nate then pulls out his lighter and spins it between his fingers while sliding down in his chair and paying absolutely no attention to the class. "I see," Mr. Miller says before muttering under his breath. "You're going to go

far in life.”

At that, Nate’s eyes snap back up to him and narrow on him, making Miller swallow back fear before turning away and getting on with the lesson. Nate notices me watching and his eyes flick over to mine. I can’t help but narrow my eyes on him before I rip them away and turn back around to face the front, unable to handle the intensity of his glare.

The class gets underway and I somehow manage to block out the daggers that are shooting into my back and the sound of Nate repeatedly flicking the lever on his lighter.

I don’t know why he hates me so much, but this game is getting old. It’s about time he moved on and found some other poor soul to torture.

The bell rings and within two seconds, Nate has his bag thrown over his shoulder and is pushing out the door.

Brooke and I follow behind and make plans to meet at our usual table for lunch before going to our next classes.

The next few classes drag by, but I’m lucky to have Courtney in a few of them.

By lunch, I meet the girls right where we had planned and walk up to the cafeteria for something to eat. I pick out something small, knowing that I probably won’t eat it anyway and turn to head back to my table when the head of the cheer skanks stops me in my tracks.

“Tora,” she says while crossing her arms over her fake chest.

“Is there something you need, Elle?” I question, knowing exactly what she’s here for.

“As a matter of fact,” she says. “There is. You need to back off Josh. He’s not interested in you, and from one girl to another, I’m just trying to look out for you. I don’t want your little heart to get broken.”

“Awww,” I smile, reading through her bullshit. “That’s awfully sweet of you, but you know what? I think I’ll try my luck. He’s just too cute.”

Her expression hardens as she takes in my sarcastic tone. “You know what, Tora? I was just trying to be nice, but you don’t deserve it. Josh is our guy and you need to take your claws out of him, maybe find someone a little

more your speed, say, like the janitor.”

I grin down at the little shrimp. “Like I said,” I tell her with a wink, not able to handle some skank telling me who I can and cannot get busy with. “I’ll take my chances.”

Elle’s eyes narrow on me. “You’ve been warned, Tora.”

“Consider this my official ‘I don’t give a shit’,” I tell her before walking back to my table.

I slide my tray down and fall into my spot beside Brooke. “What the hell was that?” Brooke questions as she shoves a bread roll into her mouth.

“That was the new cheer captain trying to assert her dominance over us mere mortals,” I explain.

“Ahhh,” Brooke nods. “She wants you to back off Josh.”

“You got it,” I laugh before I look down at my food and push it around a little. I sit with the girls, not actually eating when I notice every single eye of the cheerleaders on me. I turn and give them a little wave before getting up and emptying my tray in the bin.

While I’m up, I smirk to myself as I cross the room to the football table. I find Josh sitting between a group of his friends and I lean down over him while the cheerleaders narrow their eyes on me. “Hey, Josh,” I smile as I squeeze my hands into his big shoulders.

“Hey, Tora,” he grins as his arm snakes out around my waist. He pulls me down on his lap between a wall of muscle and my arms naturally fall around his neck. I can’t help but smirk at Elle before I seal my lips on his.

I know it’s not the greatest kiss and it’s probably never going to go anywhere with him, but knowing that I can piss off Elle in the process is too good of an opportunity to pass up.

As he pulls his lips away from mine, I grin up at him. “I’ll see you later,” I tell him before gently pressing my lips to his once more and scooting off his lap.

He slaps my ass as I walk away and I look across at Elle while I make a show of fixing up my lip gloss. Her face is practically glowing from anger

and I realize without a seed of doubt in my mind that after going against Elle's warning, I've just declared war on the cheerleaders, though, I don't really care. I'll make out with whoever the hell I want to make out with, school politics be damned.

Tora Roberts does not bend to the will of cheerleaders.

As I fall back down into my seat, Brooke nudges me in the ribs. "That was a dangerous move," she warns me.

"I know," I laugh. "But it was so worth it to see her face."

I reach for my drink bottle and tip my head back to take a drink which is when I feel it. The familiar stare of Nate Ryder. I let out a breath and turn around, and right there, making his way out of the cafeteria with his group of followers is Nate with his dark eyes piercing into mine. Knowing that he's just watched my little performance pulls something within me, though I don't know why and that fact alone pisses me off.

I shake the thought from my head and pay attention to my girls. Before I know it, the end of lunch bell is ringing and we're piling out of the cafeteria to head to our afternoon classes.

Two hours later, I meet Brooke by her car and we get our asses out of there. It's been a long day and I am so not in the mood to deal with any more cheerleaders, jocks, or bad boys.

We get home and as usual, Brooke makes herself welcome as we flick on the music in my room and spend our afternoon immersed in our own world. Brooke with her phone and me with my Kindle.

Chapter 4

I sit back on my couch with my feet up and flick through the movie channels. It's Thursday night and Brooke has just disappeared for the night after her mother called a billion times, requesting that she get her ass home for dinner.

With no movies that I'm in the mood for, I find the latest '*Game of Thrones*' episode and flick it on before grabbing the blanket over the back of the couch and pulling it down over me.

I completely stretch out.

This is the life. No parents. No one telling me what I should be doing. Everything is on my own schedule. Don't get me wrong, I love my parents, but having this little slice of freedom has been great.

A noise at the front door has me flying to my feet. What the hell was that? More importantly, who the hell was that? I flick the TV off as I hear someone walking through my house and find myself cowering in the corner of the room and sticking my head out to see.

Shit. My heart races as a stranger walks through my home. Maybe I'm not ready to be left on my own. I mean, why the hell didn't the security system pick up on the fact the someone was either coming through the gate or jumping it?

Fuck.

"Where the fuck are you?" I hear the familiar voice call out in annoyance.

My mouth drops open. That couldn't be Nate, right?

I wait a little longer, waiting and watching until he steps into my line of vision.

I see red.

I storm out of my hiding spot and find him walking through the kitchen as anger bubbles up inside me. "What the hell do you think you're

doing breaking into my house?” I demand as I get right up in front of him.

He watches me as though I’m some kind of irritating rodent. “What crawled up your ass?” he grunts with that annoying smirk on his face.

“What are you doing in my house?”

“Take a fucking chill pill,” he says. “Mom sent me to check on you. Believe me, if I could, I’d be anywhere else but here.”

“Right, that’s great,” I smile. “You’ve checked and now you can get your ass out of here,” I tell him before turning my back and walking away. “Tell her I’m fine.”

The sound of the fridge opening has me stopping in my tracks. “Ah... what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He searches through the fridge, but I don’t know what he’s looking for. There’s absolutely nothing in it. Well, nothing worth eating.

“What did you have for dinner?” he questions with a grunt.

“How is that any of your business?” I ask as I prop my hand on my hip.

He closes the fridge and turns to face me with his dark eyes piercing into me. “Answer the damn question, Tori,” he demands. “Or are you not eating again? You know, I’ve watched you throw out your lunch every day this week.”

My back straightens as I suck in a breath. How the hell does he know that? Nobody knows that. He didn’t just ask if I wasn’t eating, he asked if I’m not eating *again* like he knows about the other time. I desperately want to question him on it, but that’s not a conversation I’m willing to have, especially not with him.

The way he watches me with an impatient raised eyebrow has my jaw clenching as the anger takes over. I mean, how does what I put into my body have anything to do with him? I turn back and start heading for the stairs. “I hope the door hits you on the way out.”

I can just picture him narrowing his eyes on my back, probably fuming from not having his questions answered. It’s a basic rule around here; if one of the Ryder brothers tells you to do something, you jump, no

questions asked. I'm sure the fact that he's not getting what he wants right now is probably grating on his nerves just the way I like it.

I make it to my room and close the door behind me before laying back on my bed. I listen out for him to make his way back through the front door so I can go down and set the alarm for the night, only the sound never comes.

I'm about to go and figure out why the hell he hasn't reacquainted himself with the front door when the door of my room flies open and Nate comes tearing into my room looking like a man on a mission. He walks over to my closet, grabs a bag, and starts ripping clothes off the hangers before shoving them into the bag as I lay here and gawk.

Words are lost on me as I watch the scene unfolding before me. He looks my way before looking back at the task before him. "Don't just sit there," he tells me. "Pack your things."

"Um.... What?" I grunt.

"My mother promised your mother that she would look out for you, and right now, this bullshit where you don't buy yourself groceries, you don't eat, or lock the fucking door is not going to fly with her. So, pack your shit. You're staying at my place," he demands.

Those last few words have me jumping into action. I scramble up to my feet before storming into my closet and ripping my bag out of his hands. "Over my dead body," I snap. "I'd rather die than sleep in a room next door to you."

"Too fucking bad. You don't have a choice," he says, snatching the bag back and continuing throwing clothes into it. It doesn't go unnoticed that he's grabbing all my favorite clothes, though, I'm not surprised. After all, he makes a habit of glaring at me every day. "Now, pack your shit. I'm leaving in two minutes."

I scoff as I walk back out of the closet and make a show of collapsing into my bed and pulling out my Kindle. "No," I say. "No way in hell."

"Fine by me," he says. "But mom is going to ask me what happened when I came over here, and I'm sure she won't be too pleased to find out you've forgotten to feed yourself all week. I mean, you know how our

parents like to talk.”

Shit. “You wouldn’t.”

His eyes sparkle as he watches me and I know without a doubt that he would. “You want to make a bet?” he says with an annoying smirk that I want to slap right off his face.

I groan as I get myself to my feet and head into my bathroom. “You’re an asshole,” I yell over my shoulder. I can’t believe that dirty swamp turd. He’d rat me out to my parents, and knowing them, I’d end up in therapy again.

That damn rat bastard.

He doesn’t respond, just keeps working on pulling my clothes off the hangers. I huff around the bathroom, grabbing the few things I’ll need before storming back out and grabbing my phone and Kindle off the bed.

I bend down to grab the charger when Nate moves on to my dresser and rips open my underwear drawer. “What do we have here?” he says slowly before digging in and pulling out a black lacey thong. “Who are you planning on wearing this for?”

I let out an annoyed huff before tearing my way back into the closet and snatching the thong out of his fingers. “What’s the matter, Nate? You’re acting as though you’ve never seen one before,” I tell him as I grab a handful of my undies and bras and shove them into the bag.

“Please,” Nate scoffs. “I’ve seen more of them than you could possibly own in a lifetime.”

I roll my eyes as I know he’s not lying. He’s just that much of a manwhore. “Ugh,” I say in distaste. “You’re such a pig.”

I throw my toiletries and array of chargers into the bag and watch as he gives me a smug look before stalking out of my room. “Get your keys to your car,” he demands as he walks down the stairs. “I’m not driving your sorry ass around all the time.”

“No, can do,” I tell him. “I don’t drive it.”

“What?” he grunts, stopping on the second last step and turning to face me. “What do you mean you don’t drive it? There’s nothing wrong with

it. It's brand new."

"It's a stick," I reply.

"So?"

"So, I don't drive a stick," I say, throwing my hands up, annoyed that I'm even explaining this to him.

He scoffs as he watches me. "You're telling me, your dad bought you a car that you don't know how to drive?"

I ignore his comments and storm past him as I make my way down the rest of the stairs. My body rushes past his, bumping his shoulder on the way past. I head into the kitchen and grab my house keys before marching to the front door, which Nate has left wide open.

I look out into the driveway and see the famous Camaro. Nate's matte black Chevrolet Camaro with black rims. The car that every single person in the senior year talks about. The boys all want it for themselves while all the girls dream about getting in there with him and letting him take them for a ride followed by a different ride in the back seat or on the hood. The car is sexy and screams danger, just like it's driver.

This is the car that I never in one hundred years thought I'd be getting into.

"Hurry up," Nate demands.

I let out what must be my hundredth huff in the last fifteen minutes before turning around to set the alarm and lock the door. I cautiously get into Nate's stupid car as though I'm about to catch a disease. He turns on the engine and it purrs to life. The engine vibrates right through the seats and I feel it against my lady bits and right up into my core.

I adjust myself on the seat and don't miss the smirk on Nate's face as he peels up the driveway before leaning out the window and entering the code for the gate. "How the hell do you know the code?" I question.

"It's been the same for the last seventeen years," he scoffs. "1005. October fifth. Your birthday."

I rip my eyes away from him, not sure how that makes me feel. I mean, sure, back when we were younger that could be something I'd assume

he would know, but not now. Surely, he would have forgotten those details about me.

I focus on looking out the window and ignoring the wickedly sexy man beside me. He doesn't deserve my attention. Not one ounce of it.

Nate jams his knee up under the steering wheel and frees his hands so he can easily pull a cigarette out of the box and light it up. I have to admit, watching how easily he can control his car with just one knee is pretty damn impressive, yet the fact that he's doing it so he can inhale a cancer stick has me just as disgusted.

A few minutes later, he pulls up to his place and I look up at it with a million different emotions rushing through me.

I used to come here all the time. That only stopped when mom decided I was old enough to make my own decisions about where I'd like to spend my days. It could also have something to do with the fact that she and Trish liked to have a few glasses of wine and would always lose track of time, staying up until crazy hours of the morning talking. After the third time that happened and Nate's dad had to scoop me off the couch, she stopped bringing me. That decision made me the happiest little girl in the world.

Yet, here I am again. Facing the house I hated coming to as a teenager. I mean, when I was younger I liked to come as I loved hanging out with Nate and Jesse. They were always so cool and fun. They got to run around and make a mess in the back yard. They could swim all day and invite their friends over. I loved it here until things changed.

Nate's door slamming has me jerking out of my thoughts and I groan as I get myself out of his car. I watch as he walks up the stairs of his home with my bag in his hand. I have to admit, I didn't think he'd take it for me, though, that thought is shut down as he opens the door and dumps the bag right in the middle of the entryway. I narrowly escape tripping over it before I watch as he darts up the stairs.

I stand awkwardly in the doorway. How did this become my Thursday night?

I make my way into the house, feeling completely out of place. I mean, this home is just as big as mine, but it has a bit of a weird layout, not

to mention the fact that I feel really awkward.

I walk through a hallway and come out into the kitchen to find Trish Ryder in the kitchen, standing before the stove. “Um, hi,” I say with a little wave when she doesn’t notice me.

Her head whips in my direction before her eyes widen in surprise. “Oh, Tora, honey. What a nice surprise,” she says as she places a pot on the stove and wipes her hands on a dish towel. “What are you doing here? Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” I smile. “Everything’s fine.”

“I sent Nate to check on you,” she tells me.

“Yes,” I say with a groan. “I know. That’s why I’m here.” Her eyebrows furrow as she looks to me in confusion. “Nate doesn’t believe I’m capable of looking after myself, so he kindly suggested I stay here.”

“Oh, no,” she says with a knowing sigh. “What did he do?”

“Kidnapping would be putting it mildly.”

She presses her lips together and walks forward. “Well, you’re more than welcome to stay,” she tells me. “It must be very lonely being in that big house all by yourself.”

I think about it for a moment and how Nate coming in unannounced had scared the crap out of me and made me realize that maybe I can’t quite handle being by myself. “Yeah, I guess,” I say.

“Alright,” she says with an excited smile. “That settles it. You’ll stay here until your parents return home. I’ve always wanted another girl in the house.”

“Thank you,” I say with a laugh.

“Now, it’s been a while since you’ve been here. Do you need me to show you to your room?”

“Do you mind?” I question. “I already got lost walking from the front door to here,” I admit.

Trish presses her lips together and shakes her head in exasperation. “Did Nate not show you in?”

“No,” I scoff. “Though, I wasn’t expecting anything different.”

“Oh dear,” she says before leading me out the kitchen. “I apologize for his appalling behavior today. I don’t know where he gets it from.”

That much is clear. His parents are the nicest people on the planet, in fact, just being here with Trish for the last few minutes reminds me of just how much I liked her when I was growing up. Surely Nate’s bad attitude isn’t something that’s in his genes. It’s just not possible.

I grab my bag before following Trish up the stairs. The more stairs we climb, the louder the music gets from up here. She leads me to a door and pushes through to a beautiful guest room. Super modern with a personal bathroom. Exactly what I’ll need... for the night that is. I intend to escape as quickly as I can. Maybe I’ll get Brooke to take me back home after school tomorrow.

I drop my bag into the room and look to Trish who points down the hallway to a closed door which has music blasting from the other side. “That’s Jesse’s bedroom at the end,” she tells me before pointing to the one directly across from me. “And this is Nate’s room. I’m sure the boys will help you with anything you need.”

“Thank you,” I tell her as I eye Nate’s door.

How did I end up in a room right across the hallway from him? Was I an awful person in another life? Is this punishment for something I’ve done?

“Alright,” Trish says. “I better get back to dinner. I hope you’re hungry.”

With that, she disappears down the stairs and I find myself once again, standing awkwardly in the Ryder home.

With nothing else to do, I close the door and practically lock myself in my new room.

Chapter 5

I hear Trish calling out for dinner and I reluctantly get to my feet. This is going to be the worst night of my life. Sitting around a table with both Nate and Jesse while their parents dote on what good little boys they are. Not to mention, I'm going to have to eat whatever it is she's served up, rather than just grabbing some frozen veggies out of the freezer and heating them up like I've done every other night.

I pull the door of my room open at the same time both Nate and Jesse do. Nate's eyes find mine and I instantly look away with a scowl. "Whoa," Jesse says from down the hallway, and I swear, I can practically hear the smirk in his voice. "Do we have a house guest?"

I look back over my shoulder at the irritating sixteen-year-old, not wanting to be rude and give him a little smile. He hurries and catches up to me before throwing his arm over my shoulder. The three of us walk down the stairs and I've never felt so out of place in my life. "You let me know if there's anything you need," Jesse says in a sleazy tone. "I'll be more than happy to lend you a hand. Hell, I could lend you my bed if you want."

"Ugh," I groan as I push his arm off my shoulder. "Do you forget that I was there for your whole 'shitting your pants' phase?"

At that, Jesse goes quiet while Nate knocks his shoulder and laughs. I ignore them and race down the stairs before them, feeling proud of my small victory.

I turn into the dining room which joins from the kitchen and smile at Trish. "Is there anything I can help you with?" I question.

"No, darling. You just find a seat and dig in."

I do just that and grab myself a plate before reaching for the serving spoon with the intention of dishing up the smallest serving.

As I lean across the table, a large hand comes down over mine and slides the spoon out of my fingers. "Here," Nate says, sending a bolt of electricity shooting up my arm. "Let me help you with that."

He instantly scoops deep into the food and places a large helping on my plate. “That’ll do,” I tell him with a grunt as he goes for a second spoonful.

“Don’t be silly,” he says. “I saw you at lunch today. You hardly ate anything. You must be starving.”

“I ate plenty,” I tell him as I glance up to see Trish watching Nate with nothing but love as she takes in her son acting like a gentleman, though I know better. “It must have been when you and Jesse were busy making the new kid feel welcomed,” I say.

He gives me a hard stare, knowing I’m referring to how they made some poor kid feel like absolute shit when they disregarded him and laughed when he asked to sit with them. Though to be fair, Nate didn’t say a word through the whole thing, but he’s their leader. He could have told them to knock it off and they would have stopped in the blink of an eye. That makes him just as guilty.

“There’s plenty to go around,” Nate says before the spoon comes down on my plate again, doubling the huge pile. He finally releases the spoon before grabbing the sugariest soda possible and filling my cup as high as it can go.

Jesse drops down beside me with a smirk while Cade appears from who the hell knows where and gives me a warm smile. “Welcome, Tora,” he says as Nate walks around the other side of the table and drops down into the spot directly opposite me. “I understand you’ll be staying with us a while.”

“Apparently, so,” I tell him. “I mean, if that’s ok with you.”

“Of course, it is,” he tells me before wrestling the serving spoon out of Jesse’s hand. “How have you been?”

“Good. And yourself?” I say, trying to hold back the vomit that threatens to rise in my throat from the amount of food before me.

“I’m starving,” he says with a grin as he scoops his fork off the table and digs in deep.

I look up and scowl at the grin Nate gives me as he proudly dishes up his own dinner. He puts about half on his plate as what he gave me, making me want to launch myself across the table and strangle the dickhead. He

picks up his own fork and smirks up at me. “Dig in, Tori,” he says with laughter in his eyes.

I tear my eyes away from him and look down at the plate. Just seeing all that food makes me feel sick. I’ll never get through all of that and I worry that I’ll offend Trish if I don’t eat.

Reluctantly, I pick up my fork and take the first bite. I mean, it’s good. It’s probably the yummiest thing I’ve eaten all month, but I just can’t. I swallow it down and can’t help but wonder how much that one bite is going to add to my hips and stomach.

I dig my fork in again and slowly raise it to my mouth.

It’s just me and the fork that exists at this moment. Not the awkward conversation around me. Not the sound of forks scratching against expensive china. Not the sound of Jesse belching. Just me and the fork.

I can do it.

It’s just food. It will be fine. I’ll swallow it, and then I’ll go for a run in the morning. Simple fix.

I pop the bite into my mouth and my gag reflexes instantly say hello. I stop chewing and cringe while I hold the first bite down.

I can do this. I’m going to make this plate my bitch. I’m going to annihilate it, and I’m going to be proud of it.

Swallow.

Another bite.

Chew.

After the fifth bite, I’ve eaten more in one sitting that I have over the past month and I find myself pushing the food around my plate, staring at it as though I’ve let myself down, though all I can think about is how I want to throw it all up.

“Is something wrong?” I hear Trish ask. I snap my eyes up to meet hers to find every single eye in the room on me. “Do you not like it? I can make you something else.”

“Oh, um-”

“No,” Nate cuts me off as his heavy glare returns to me. “It’s fine. She’ll eat it.”

“Nate,” his mother scolds in horror at the way he’s just spoken to me... if only she knew. She goes to reprimand him but I stop her.

“No,” I say, ripping my eyes away from Nate. “It’s fine. I really like it. I’m just not very hungry.”

Her eyebrows furrow as she looks between me and Nate, trying to figure out whatever secret is clearly hidden between us. “Oh... are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I smile before looking back down at my plate and lifting another forkful to my mouth. “I’m sure.”

I chew the food and the second I swallow it, my stomach churns.

Oh no. I try to take slow deep breaths to hold it down, but the more I do that, the more I smell the food before me.

Shit. It’s coming.

I scramble out of my seat and bolt for the stairs as my hand slaps over my mouth, trying to hold it down before I get to my bathroom.

I race up the stairs, taking two at a time before pushing through the door of my room and slamming into the bathroom door. I only just make it to the toilet before my dinner comes flying up.

I hurl my guts up over the toilet and fall to my knees.

This is not a good start.

After a few minutes, I rest my head against the cool porcelain of the toilet seat, feeling utterly dejected. I know I have a problem, but I’m not ready to admit it.

I’ve been through this once before and got myself healthy, though it was through my mom’s constant nagging and a shit load of therapy. It was months that she would barely leave my side, constantly watching me and forcing me to hold food down. That was at fourteen and now at seventeen, the cycle is beginning again.

A throat clears from the doorway and my head snaps up to see Nate standing before me. He leans against the door frame with a less than

impressed frown on his face and his arms crossed over his wide chest.

I wonder how long he's been standing there but from the disgusted look in his eye, I'd say he's been here a while.

He shakes his head at me as though I'm the most disappointing creature on earth before turning his back and walking away.

Tears fill my eyes. No one has ever seen me this low. Even last time this happened, I never allowed mom to see it. Not even Brooke knows about it, but having Nate, the one person who has made sure to make my life a living hell, witness the lowest moment in my life, makes me want to crawl into a hole and never come out.

I clean myself up and take myself back into the bedroom where I sit on the end of the bed, staring into oblivion. It's then I notice my leftover dinner sitting on the bedside table and realize he must have brought it up for me. Though, whether he was planning on shoving it down my throat or thought I might get hungry later, I don't know. Either way, I know deep down, there was a caring thought in there somewhere. Maybe the old Nate isn't completely lost.

I let out a sigh when I hear a knock in my open doorway. I turn around to see Trish sticking her head in with a bottle of water and painkillers. "Can I come in?" she questions.

"Of course, you can," I tell her. "This is your home."

"Yes, but this is your space," she tells me before placing the water and painkillers down on the bedside table next to the forgotten dinner. "How are you feeling?" she asks as she takes a seat beside me and presses her hand to my forehead the same way my mother does.

"Better, thank you," I tell her with a grateful smile.

"I'm so sorry, sweet girl," she says, wrapping her arm around me and pulling me in. "Had I known you weren't feeling well, I wouldn't have called you down for dinner."

"It's fine," I tell her. "It's probably just food poisoning," I say, hating the lie as it leaves my lips. "I'll be ok."

"Are you sure? I brought you some painkillers and some water to wash them down. Do you need anything else?"

“No, thank you,” I tell her. “I might just lay down for a while with my Kindle.”

“Oh, that’s right. I had forgotten how much you love to read,” she says with a fond smile. “Well, I’ll get out of your hair. I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

“Thanks,” I say again, feeling like the biggest piece of shit on the face of the planet.

Trish walks out the door before pausing in the doorway. She looks back at me and then across to the plate of food. “Do you want me to take that away?”

I give her yet another grateful smile and nod. “Yes, please,” I say.

She gives me a sympathetic smile before leaning over and grabbing the plate. Within the blink of an eye, she walks out the door and pulls it closed behind her, leaving me to my peace and quiet.

I fall back onto my bed and grab my Kindle. I open it up to find a new release by one of my favorite authors and can’t help but dive straight in.

I get myself comfortable amongst the hundreds of pillows on the bed and get lost in the world of my book.

I must get halfway through when I realize I’ve been reading non-stop all night. I reach across for a drink of water only to find the bottle completely empty and the clock staring back at me telling me it’s past midnight.

The need to read just one more chapter flies through me but with school tomorrow, I’m going to have to call it quits for the night.

Still needing a drink, I slide my Kindle onto the bedside table and slip out the door. I step out into the hallway to see a bright light coming from Nate’s room and find my eyes raising into his room.

It’s exactly as I remember it, only the Batman bed sheets have been upgraded for plain black ones. I tear my eyes away and head down the stairs.

I search through the dark kitchen until I find a cup before filling it up with ice cubes and water. I bring the chilly water to my lips and close my eyes as the water travels down my throat and soothes the soreness from my earlier meeting with the toilet bowl.

A noise draws my attention and I furrow my eyebrows. It almost sounds as though someone is down here with me. Though, that couldn't be right. All the lights are off down here... but then, Nate's door was open with the lights on, and I know I was only peeking for a moment, but I was sure he wasn't in there.

With my glass of water in hand, I go exploring. Both the kitchen and dining room are empty so I go searching through the formal dining and living rooms. They're also empty. So, assuming the hallway closets and bathrooms are clear, I head for the den where the boys have basically transformed the informal living area into the ultimate man cave and I have to admit, the room is awesome.

I walk around the corner and notice the lights in the room are dimmed right down, then come to a screeching halt as I find Nate, shirtless on the couch with a girl naked as the day she was born grinding down on his lap. It's not hard to tell that from her long dark hair, this girl is definitely not Ashley.

His hands squeeze into her waist as she thrusts her tits into his face. He takes advantage of the situation and sucks her nipple into his mouth. I gasp at the sight and find myself staring. I should be scrambling away like an idiot, but instead, I'm glued to the floor, watching the show before me.

Nate turns his head and locks his eyes on me before smirking and turning back to the girl. He gets on with what he was doing and my mouth pops open. I mean, the girl clearly has no idea that I'm here, but apparently, Nate is more than happy to have me watch the show. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if he asked me to join, and honestly, from the absolute pleasure the girl looks to be in, I might even consider it.

The girl throws her head back and moans as Nate works his tongue over her nipple and I snap back to reality. I tear my eyes away and turn my back before scurrying away like I should have done in the first place.

I hear his soft chuckle behind me and I do my best to tune it out before I dash up the stairs for the second time tonight, again with a need to throw up.

I close my door behind me and make sure to lock it before I put the glass of water down and dive under the covers, desperate to get that image of

Nate out of my head.

He's the guy I'm supposed to hate, instead, watching him like that... well, it was hot and I find myself desperate for a taste.

Shit.

Nate is an asshole. Nate is an asshole. Nate is an asshole.

But the way he worked his tongue over her nipple. Far out. That girl was in ecstasy. I can only imagine how good he'd be at everything else. I mean, the guy certainly has a reputation.

I pull the blanket right up over my head and completely cover myself in darkness before grabbing my Kindle and trying to lose myself in the book, only my mind keeps taking me back to him and ruining the story for me. Which sucks as I've been waiting for the release of this book forever and now it's being ruined by Nate.

Damn it.

I shut off my Kindle and clench my eyes closed, begging the images to leave my mind so I start thinking about anything and everything else.

I think about kittens. I think about my classes. I think about Josh's sloppy kisses. And then I think about that scene in *'Paranormal Activity'* where the blanket is lifted. And then I shudder.

Just great. All I've managed to do is freak myself out in a home that is not mine. I need to turn the light on, but now all I can think about is something grabbing my feet when I dash across the room. So, I reach over and turn the side lamp on as there's no way in hell I'll be sleeping in the dark tonight.

Maybe I'm better off thinking about Nate's body all over me than the images that haunt me from *'Paranormal Activity'*.

Just as I start to tune everything out and my mind finally begins to ease, I hear him on the stairs, only he's not alone. The girl giggles and a moment later, his door is closed followed by the sounds of her loud moans.

I lay in bed, wide awake, listening to the whole thing. The beginning, the long, drawn out repetition of the middle, and then finally, the explosive end.

It's damn lucky his parents sleep way over the other side of this big house as I can't image Trish and Cade being particularly thrilled about finding a random girl in his room in the middle of the night. But at least this gives me something for when he threatens to tell my secret as I now have something on him. Something that could destroy his relationship with Ashley and something that would finally open his mother's eyes to the fact that her baby is not the good little boy he makes himself out to be.

Chapter 6

My phone ringing in the dead of the night has me bolting upright in bed to realize it's not actually the dead of night, but first thing in the morning. Jesus. How is it morning already? After the night I had, I'd do just about anything to sleep for another century, maybe that might help to take the images of Nate out of my head.

I glance around to remember that I'm not in the safety of my own home but being held hostage as Nate's personal punching bag. My phone continues yelling at me and I reach across and rip it off its charger

I smile down at the caller ID and hit accept. "Hey, mom," I say on a yawn. "How're things going over there?"

"Hi, baby. We're good. It's been a hard few days so far, but we're holding up," she says in a tone that tells me she's worried. "Listen, I know it's early at home, but it's getting pretty late here and I'm exhausted. So, I wanted to catch you before school," she explains before letting out a breath. "I got a call from Trish earlier saying you're at her place. Is everything ok, honey? She mentioned you were sick at dinner."

Shit.

"Yeah, mom. Everything is fine," I lie. "It was just a little lonely at home by myself and Trish cooks better than I can. She said it was ok that I stay."

"Oh, yes," she says. "I'm not worried about that. I'm more concerned about you being sick at dinner. You're not throwing up again, are you? I thought we were past that."

I cringe, hating to lie to my mother. "I'm ok," I tell her. "Really. I think it was something I ate yesterday at lunch. Maybe food poisoning. But I feel good now, it must be gone."

She's silent for a short while as she considers my explanation. "You're sure?" she questions.

"Yeah, mom. Promise. I'm fine now. I'm feeling much better this

morning."

She lets out a relieved sigh. "Ok. I was worried there. I don't think I could handle you being sick again, not with everything that's going on with your Nanna."

"How is she?" I question, happy to change the topic and have the spotlight off me.

"It's not looking good, sweetie," she says in a pained voice. "I think this might be the end of the road for Nanna, but she's putting up a tough fight. You should prepare yourself."

"Really?" I question with a heavy heart as my eyes grow watery. "Do you think I could maybe video chat with her? Or maybe I could make her a video for you to play for her."

"I think that would be lovely," mom says with a heavy sadness. "She'd love to see you. She's been asking for you."

"Really?" I ask again.

"Yeah, sweetie," she chuckles. "I've already shown her all the pictures on my phone twice."

"Oh, geez," I laugh. "I have a free period today. I'll make her a video and send you some more things to show her."

"That would be wonderful, darling," mom says. "I better go, it's getting late and we have an early start tomorrow with the doctor appointments."

"Alright, mom. I love you. Let Nanna know I love her too."

"I love you too, Tori. Be a good girl for Trish," she reminds me before ending the call.

I put the phone back down on my bedside table and close my eyes. It's only seven in the morning so I can still sleep a few hours before having to get up and get ready for school, but then, I'm so out of my comfort zone being here that finding sleep again is going to be impossible.

Instead, I get myself up out of bed and lay down on the floor. I go through my morning ritual of performing all my sit ups and push ups before adding a few squats and finishing on a good stretch.

I head into my personal bathroom and get myself showered and ready for the day before heading downstairs and grabbing a banana out of the fruit bowl. I pass Jesse in the kitchen who has made himself at least eight pieces of toast, a bowl of porridge, and a fruit salad.

Jesse sits on the kitchen counter in nothing but a pair of sweat pants, annihilating his breakfast when he sees me walking past. He grins and winks, a trait I'm sure he's picked up from his brother. "How'd you sleep, princess?" he asks as his eyes roam up and down my body like a predator. "Were you lonely in that big bed by yourself?"

I roll my eyes and scoff as I continue walking. I don't know what happened to these boys. They used to be so sweet and now they're... well, them.

With still another hour left before I need to leave, I try picking back up on the book I was reading last night and just as I had hoped, I get pulled right in.

When I glance at the clock, I realize I'm late.

"Shit," I grunt as I throw my Kindle in my bag and dash out of my room. I hurry downstairs and search out the boys, only I can't find them anywhere. Crap. I bet they've left without me. That prick. He knows I don't have a car here. I should have expected this.

I make my way back upstairs, grumbling under my breath about dickheads when I see Nate's room is still closed without a sound coming from within. I march right up to his door and bang my fist into it over and over again until he responds. "What the fuck do you want?" he groans from inside.

"Are you seriously still sleeping?" I demand through the door. "School starts in ten minutes. You need to get your lazy ass up and drive me. I can't be late today," I tell him. "I have a test first period."

The door is pulled open and I suddenly have a very shirtless Nate standing right before me, and with the way he's leaned in towards me, it's almost as though his body is calling for me to reach out and touch it. My eyes can't help but travel up and down his muscled body and I hate how alive I feel inside.

“See something you like?” I hear from up the hallway. My eyes snap up towards Jesse to see him striding towards us with a smirk. He walks right up to me and throws his arm over my shoulder. “You know,” he says before indicating towards Nate. “This guy has a girl, but I’m more than willing to strip off if you need something to feast your eyes on.”

“Seriously?” I grunt as I push his arm off my shoulder. “To me, you’re still a kid. And besides, if I was going to fall victim to one of the famous Ryder brothers, I’m going to go with the big shot, not the consolation prize.”

Jesse’s mouth literally drops open as he gawks at me, looking completely dumbfounded. “Huh,” he breathes. I narrow my eyes on him and wait for whatever awful comment he’s going to come out with next, but what he does come out with, shocks me right to the core. “Fuck yeah,” he grins. “Besides Nate, nobody has the balls to put me in my place,” he says as a grin slowly spreads over his face. He holds his hand up for a high five before leaning in and whispering in my ear. “I liked it.”

With that, he steps away and struts down the stairs like he couldn’t be happier. I’m reminded of why I’m standing here and turn my attention back to Nate to find him grinning down at me. “Big shot, huh?” he questions with a sparkle in his dark eyes.

I let out a groan. “You’re kidding, right?”

He steps forward into me and the move has me stepping back into the hallway. He takes another step and then another and I find myself pressed up against the wall. “Admit it,” he says as he pushes up into me and leans his head down to mine. “I saw the way you were watching me last night. You want to know what it’s like, don’t you? You’re intrigued.”

I tilt my head up to him and bring my hand to rest against his bare chest. “Is that an offer?” I ask him, ignoring the way his skin burns under my fingers.

I see the exact moment he thinks he’s got me. He leans in deeper, ready to take what he thinks is his. His hands find purchase on my waist. “Admit it and I’ll give you exactly what you want,” he murmurs.

I smirk to myself before I run my nose up his neck and breathe him

in. “When the day comes that I’m interested in getting an STD, I’ll be sure to let you know,” I whisper before pushing him off me. “Now get your ass dressed. I told you, I have a test.”

His eyes narrow on mine, clearly not enjoying being played, but hey, what comes around goes around, right? I can’t imagine how many times he’s played a girl in that way. “Why should I give a shit about your stupid test?” he grunts as he looks down on me.

“I’m not asking you to give a shit about my test. I’m asking you to get your ass downstairs and drive me to school,” I tell him. “This wouldn’t be your problem if you hadn’t been such a dick and brought me here.”

He lets out a heavy breath before stalking back into his room and slamming the door. I hear him rustling around inside and I lean against the wall with a grin plastered on my face. I prop my foot up against the wall and cross my arms over my chest.

Over the past few years, it’s always been Nate getting under my skin, except for now. Things are changing. I just put Jesse in his place and now I’ve done the same with Nate and it feels incredible. I mean, I’m victorious right now and the adrenaline pumping through my veins has me wanting to run up and down the hallway doing the chicken dance.

I don’t know why I’m surprised by all this. I should have known that these guys don’t show up to school until the very last moment. Jokes on me. I should have sucked it up and learned how to drive my car.

Nate’s door is ripped open and he takes one look at the smugness that completely overtakes me before turning and practically running down the stairs. Clearly, Nate Ryder is not someone who enjoys losing, but unfortunately for him, I’ve just got a taste for the good stuff and I’m not about to let that slip through my fingers.

I have to hurry to keep up with Nate as he storms out the front door and jumps straight into his Camaro. The engine purrs to life and something tells me he’s not about to wait for me to take my time. I throw myself through the passenger door of his car just in time for him to take off like a bat out of hell. I’m not even sure if the door was closed before he hit the gas.

I pull my phone out and check the time to see that the first warning

bell would be ringing right about now, but if he keeps up with this ridiculous speed, I'll make it to my class just in time, assuming I don't stop by my locker first.

A minute later, Nate pulls into the parking lot of Broken Hill High and as the bell has already rung, the lot is absolutely packed, but naturally, Nate drives straight through all the cars and finds a spot right at the front. It takes me a minute to realize this must be his spot. Not that we have designated spots here, but I'm sure people are just terrified that he'll beat the shit out of them if they were to park in a space that's declared as his.

The second his car comes to a stop, I scam. I hurry up to the school and run towards my class just in time to watch the teacher placing the test on my empty desk.

I fly through the door and fall into my desk before rummaging through my bag for a pen. The teacher tells the class that we have exactly forty minutes to complete the test, he then hits a timer and leans back with the morning paper.

I let out a breath and try to calm my racing heart as I write my name at the top of the sheet.

That was way too close for my liking. Next time, I'll be more prepared.

By lunchtime, I collapse down into the chair beside Brooke. "I'm exhausted," I tell her. "Today has literally been non-stop." She silently turns her head my way and narrows her eyes on me. "What's that look for?" I grunt.

"There's a rumor going 'round 'bout you," she says.

"Oh great," I say with a groan as a million possibilities come to mind. I mean, has Jesse said something to get payback for this morning, or maybe it's Nate who's come up with something after I shut him down. "What is it this time?"

"That you were seen getting out of Nate's car this morning," she says with a roll of her eyes as though the possibility of me doing that is slim to none.

I press my lips together and look away.

“What?” she shrieks. “What the hell, Tora? Please tell me I’m imagining this. I mean, how? There’s no way my best friend voluntarily got in Nate Ryder’s car this morning, as the best friend I know would have rather walked,” she tells me before an annoyed crease appears between her eyebrows. “And for another matter,” she adds. “It’s lunch. Why am I only just finding out about this now?”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Believe me,” I tell her. “Me riding to school with that sewer rat is only just scratching the surface.”

“Huh?” she grunts. “What could possibly be worse?”

“Try living with him,” I say.

Her mouth pops open before it slowly closes again. “Umm... I don’t even know what to say to that. You’re joking, right?”

“I wish,” I grunt. “His mom sent him to check on me after you left last night and he deemed I was incapable of looking after myself. He practically kidnapped me and took me back to his place. I’ve had to deal with his glares and Jesse’s comments all night.”

She throws her arms around me. “Shit, Torz,” she says with a pout. “That would have been horrible.”

“Believe me, it was,” I say. “That’s why I’m going to need you to give me a ride back to my place after school. There’s no way in hell I’m staying there all weekend.”

“No problem,” she says before a wicked grin crosses her lips. “Now, tell me you’ve got dirt on them? There’s got to be dirt.”

With that, I launch into my rundown of how my night went, but I find myself skipping over major parts of the story, say like, when I threw up my dinner and how I’d caught him with another girl. I also skip right over the part about what happened up against the wall this morning.

As we talk in the cafeteria, I can’t help but notice stares digging into me from three separate tables. My first instinct is to look across to Nate’s table, only for the first time in years, it’s not his stare that’s coming my way.

It’s his girlfriend, Ashley.

She must have heard about the whole car ride thing unless Nate has

told her the whole story, which I very much doubt. I mean, I wonder what her perspective would be on Nate dirtying the sheets with that random girl last night?

I look across to the next stare to find Elle and roll my eyes. It's been a week since she confronted me in this very room about Josh, and so far, her bark has been a lot worse than her bite. She hasn't had the balls to do anything about it which could either be a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, she could be too busy with cheer practice to make any moves, or she's planning something big.

Just great.

Next up, it's the eyes of Josh, only this isn't quite so much as a stare, it's more of a leer. You know, the 'I'm going to get you naked' leer which is honestly not the best look for him. I mean, the more and more I spend time with him, I realize he isn't all that great. He has the looks and the title of being the quarterback, but he also has the personality of a brick wall. I'd rather watch paint dry than spend any more time with him.

I'll have to drop this thing. Sure, it was fun to start with, but it's getting boring quickly.

The bell for the end of lunch rings and before I know it, it's the end of the day and I'm dashing down to Brooke's car in hopes of not being seen by Nate. I find it only three cars down from his and duck down beside it until Brooke comes strolling out without a care in the world. "What the hell are you doing?" she grunts as she takes me in.

"Shut up and unlock your damn car," I tell her.

She grins and hits the button before I peel the door open and slide myself in. Once I'm in the safety of her car, I finally give myself a chance to look around. I see Josh walking down to his Jeep with some random cheerleader under his arm. There's Jesse and his best friend Tyson, who are probably figuring out where they are partying tonight as, after all, it's Friday night. Then last, there's Nate, walking down to the parking lot with Ashley under his arm. I follow his movements as he gets to his car and she slips in the passenger side. I let out a breath. It doesn't look as though he had any plans on driving me home from school after all. Maybe I've gotten away with it for tonight.

Chapter 7

I lay back on my couch as the music sails right through my home. It's so good to be here.

I know I was only away from my place for a night, but since last night, I've realized I've been taking advantage of my home. I should be taking pride in the time I get to spend here as I never know when it will be ripped out from under me by brooding teenage boys.

Courtney struts around my kitchen, making herself a sandwich while Brooke lays on the opposite couch, flicking through the channels on the TV.

"Hey, what's going on?" I hear Bec's voice call from the front door.

"We're in the den," I yell back.

Not a moment later, she waltzes in and drops her things on the hallway table before falling into the seat beside me. "I heard a rumor about you today," she tells me.

"I know," I groan. I mean, how many times am I going to be asked about this? "And yes, it's true."

"Really?" she shrieks with wide eyes. "You're actually dating Josh now? It's official?"

"Huh?" I grunt as I sit up straighter. "What the hell are you talking about? I'm not dating Josh."

Brooke bursts into laughter at my misfortune while Bec gets a look of complete disappointment over her face. "Oh," she says. "He's apparently telling everyone that you guys are official now."

"You've got to be shitting me," I groan as I pull my phone out from my jeans pocket. "I've hardly spoken to the guy since school went back."

I start typing out a text.

Tora – WTF?!!!! We're dating now?

He responds almost instantly and has my blood boiling.

Josh – You're welcome.

Tora – Did it occur to you that maybe I don't want to date you? You're going to have to try a little harder than that.

Josh – Challenge accepted, baby!

Josh – Bush party tonight at Maxen's. Come with me.

I roll my eyes at his last text. I mean, that's more of a demand rather than a question. I turn my phone around and show the girls. "Apparently, there's a party on Maxen's property tonight," I explain. "And we just got our invitation."

"Hell yeah," Brooke says, jumping to her feet as Courtney walks in with her sandwich, completely lost as to what's going on.

Their excitement is contagious, but I don't know if I'm going. I mean, it's at Maxen's place and being Nate's cousin, I'm sure both the Ryder boys will be there. No thanks. That's a hard pass. I've had enough of those boys to last me a lifetime. The last thing I need is to be partying with them.

Though, with the boys out for the night, that would give me a chance to go over there and get all my crap back without being interrupted.

Brooke practically bounds out of my house with a promise to meet me tonight so she can get home and decide on what she wants to wear. I shake my head at her excitement. Brooke is the wild one and she's had a thing for Maxen since we started going to school together.

I get it, he's devilishly cute and has the same dark eyes as Nate and Jesse. He's a bad boy through and through and I don't doubt that given the chance, he would take Brooke for the ride of her life, only it's her heart I'm worried about. Don't get me wrong, Brooke has had plenty of one night stands and random hook-ups, but she's never once had feelings for the guy. It was always just fun.

But Maxen... I don't know. He has the power to hurt her and I don't like it one bit.

Courtney and Bec eventually disappear to get themselves ready as well and I find myself sitting here alone. I consider myself a bit of an introvert. I love being alone, especially as it gives me uninterrupted hours of reading time, though, right now, I'm not feeling it.

Maybe it's empty nest syndrome. Mom and dad are gone and over the

past week, there's been a lot of me time. Maybe too much me time.

The rest of the afternoon drags by and I even manage to force myself to eat a bread roll.

It's well past nine at night when I find myself sitting in the driver's seat of my Audi, looking over all the gadgets while I google how to drive this thing. I read step by step and slowly take myself up and down the driveway. I mean, I'm going to have to learn how to drive it at some point, and besides, I want my clothes back.

I consider myself a good driver... usually, but right now, I feel completely out of my depth, but practice makes perfect and what better time than the present. It's late and most of the traffic has already cleared off the roads anyway.

There are two separate ways I can get to Nate's place and one includes the main road which will be busy, otherwise, I can add a few extra minutes to my drive and take the back streets. So, with my plan in place, I slowly bring the car to a stop at the top gate.

I lean over and enter the code, and before I know it, I'm swallowing back my fear and pulling my baby out onto the road.

The car practically jumps when I shift which has me constantly hovering over the brake while trying not to take my eyes off the road to focus on the gear stick. I feel like a complete fraud driving this thing. I mean, it's my first time in my car and I'm not even enjoying it.

I get a few beeps from annoyed drivers who eventually go around me, but after an agonizingly long twenty minutes, I pull into Nate's driveway, pleased his gate is already wide open.

As I get further down the driveway, I cringe to myself. I couldn't have been more wrong. Nate isn't out. He's standing right in the middle of his open garage, leaning over the hood of his car and fiddling around with the engine.

As I get closer, he straightens himself out and I realize that, once again, the guy has lost his shirt. I mean, what is this? Do the Ryder brothers not own any clothes? Nate stands tall to watch the show and I find myself cringing again. This is going to be embarrassing.

I try to downshift and slow down but only manage to make the car jolt forward again. I see the laughter in his eyes yet he stands like a statue, acting as though nothing gets to him.

I bring the car to a stop and leave the keys in it with the engine running. Though, I can't quite remember if I'm supposed to leave the car in neutral or in first. Not wanting to pull up google and embarrass myself further, I think it over and come to the conclusion that first gear is for moving slowly, so I push down the clutch and pop the car in neutral before putting on the hand brake and getting out.

I walk down to the garage, mostly proud of myself for getting here without scratching my car. I studiously ignore Nate as I aim for the internal door of the garage and have to stop when he sidesteps and places himself right before me. "What do you think you're doing?" he questions as his stare seems to look right through me.

"I'm getting my stuff," I tell him as I cross my arms over my chest and look up at him as though I don't have a spare second to waste, especially not on him.

"What do you need it for?" he asks as he looks down at me with a knowing grin. "Getting ready for a date with Henderson?"

I quirk an eyebrow as I watch him. "What's it to you?" I question as I raise up on my tippy toes and put myself impossibly closer. "Jealous?"

He scoffs as his eyes become hard. "Get in the car."

"Excuse me?" I laugh.

"You heard me, Tori," he says, grating on my nerves for using that nickname. "Get your ass in my car."

I shake my head and attempt to step around him, only he moves with me, blocking my path. "Now," he tells me.

"Or what?" I challenge.

"I'll make you."

I narrow my eyes on his and know without a doubt he means it, so rather than put myself in this position again, I turn on my heel and stalk back to my car. I can sit around the corner and wait until he's gone to come back.

I get to the door of my Audi and pull it open before his hands are at my waist, pulling me back. “Let me go, you prick,” I demand as he holds me at arm’s length and dives into my car. He goes to turn off the engine when he looks down and shakes his head. “For fuck’s sake,” he groans under his breath as he takes the car out of neutral and puts it in first before turning the keys and getting out.

In an instant, he grabs me again while bending, and before I know it, he has me thrown over his shoulder as he stalks back to his Camaro. “Put me down,” I say, banging my fists into his back.

He chuckles to himself as he waltzes into the garage, pulls open the passenger side door, and throws me in. I land in the seat with a huff and before I have a chance to right myself, the door is slammed shut and locked.

I watch in annoyance and he struts around the front of the car like King Shit before getting in. He sits beside me in silence and backs out of the driveway, expertly going around my car. How did I end up in this situation again? “Where the hell are you taking me?” I demand as I notice the packet of cigarettes sitting between us in the center console and roll my eyes.

He doesn’t respond, just sits there with a smirk across his devilishly handsome face.

My blood boils and the need to smack him is rising high within me. “What’s your problem, Nate?” I yell as I feel my face reddening in anger. “I’m not some pawn you can use in your twisted games. I have a life and I don’t need you constantly appearing in it and trying to make it a living hell,” I tell him. “I get it, ok. You don’t like me. You’ve made that crystal clear, but news flash, I don’t give a shit. Your childish tactics have no effect on me, so you can go right ahead and leave me the hell alone.”

Again, he doesn’t respond, just sits there with that stupid smirk, only now, the smirk is so much bigger.

I let out a frustrated groan before sitting back and accepting my fate.

He drives like an idiot through the streets and I find myself grabbing onto things to stop me from jostling around. He drives for twenty minutes before he pulls into an old property.

It’s pitch black out here and I sit a little taller as I study the dirt road

before us. In the dark, all I can tell is that it's long and probably leads to absolutely nowhere. He probably plans on killing me and dumping my body where it will never be found.

He drives for another few minutes and when he turns a corner, I see a haze of bright lights in the distance. I look over at him in confusion. Where the hell are we?

He doesn't look at me, just keeps on going, so I focus on the lights.

As we draw nearer, things start to fall into place.

There are people everywhere. Loud music. Cars. Booze. I start to think it's some exclusive party when I notice the drag racing track they all stand around. What the hell is Nate into?

Nate drives past the lines of cars and straight into the sea of people before him, all of whom part and cheer for him as though he's some sort of celebrity around here. "Are you really that arrogant you can't park your precious car alongside everyone else's?" I question with as much attitude as I can possibly find within myself.

Again, the bastard doesn't respond.

The smirk on his face should have been the big hint. I should have known he was up to something, but naturally, I'm left wondering, right up until he pulls up beside another car that's busily revving the shit out of its engine.

Nate looks over at the other driver and only then do I realize he has just set himself up to race. "No," I say with wide eyes as I dive for the door handle and pull against it. No way in hell is he about to drag race with me in the car.

The door is locked but that doesn't stop me from yanking on it a second and third time. "Let me out," I demand as the mischief in his eyes seem to increase. He reaches forward and turns the music right up, making me have to yell to be heard over it. "I'm more than happy for you to risk your life doing this stupid shit, but not mine. I won't die for this, Nate."

He keeps his eyes forward and I watch on in shock as a girl in the tiniest little skirt, high heels, and crop walks between the two cars and turns to face us with a scrap of fabric in her hand. She raises her hands above her

head and the panic really sets in. I have to get out of here now before it's too late. "Nate," I scream to the wall of muscle beside me as fear continues to rattle me. "I know you hear me, asshole. Let me out. You're going to kill me. Nate?"

I was not made for this shit. I read books. My homework is always done. I help my parents around the house. I was not made for drag racing.

The girl rips her hand down and Nate hits the gas. The momentum of the car jolting forward has me flying back into the seat with my breath rushing from my lungs. I hastily reach across myself and grab my seatbelt before trying my hardest to get it buckled as quickly as possible.

I grip onto anything I possibly can as I watch out the front windshield with wide eyes. "I'm going to kill you," I shriek.

Nate hits the corner and turns the wheel with practiced ease, making the back of the car whip around so he can drift around the corner while I scream for it to end.

My throat hurts with my scream but I don't get a chance to think about it as the next corner is coming.

I take a second to look over at Nate and take in how damn relaxed he is right now. I mean, how is that possible? The fucker is completely in the zone. He looks cool, calm, and collected. I swear, it's as though he's taking a Sunday drive to the grocery store rather than scaring the absolute shit out of me.

He shifts through the gears, knowing his car like the back of his hand, and I swear, I've never seen anything sexier. It only takes me a second to realize that he's completely in control of his car. But that doesn't change the fact that this is easily the most terrifying thing that has ever happened to me.

I rip my eyes off Nate and focus on the track before me. There's a corner coming up a shit load faster than I ever thought possible. I find my hand being ripped off the 'holy shit' bar as I point out the windshield. "Corner," I scream in case the dickhead happened to miss it.

I hear his chuckle coming from beside me and have to resist launching myself at him and gouging his eyes out. That will have to wait as my life is currently in his hands.

This is not my idea of a good Friday night.

I see the other car to my right and find myself secretly wishing Nate would win. As the other car creeps closer, Nate pushes down on the gas and shoots us forward.

I clench my eyes.

I can't watch.

I get rocked around in the seat and find my eyes tearing right back open. Having them closed makes it so much worse. After another thirty seconds of reminding myself how to breathe, the car comes to a screeching halt, ripping up the dirt track behind it and jolting me forward, making me reach out and stop my momentum on the dashboard.

As the car comes to a complete stop, I slap my hand across my chest as my heart threatens to break right through my ribcage. People come rushing towards the car from all around, but right now, all I can focus on is the rage building up within me.

Nate looks over at me, looking as proud as can be with that damn smirk still right in place. I narrow my eyes on him. "Let me out," I say, letting him see just how damn serious I am right now.

Finally, he reaches across and flicks the button to unlock the doors and just to be a pain, my hand swipes out and steals his packet of cigarettes before I get my ass out of there. I weave through all the people trying to get a glimpse of their favorite bad boy and hoping he's not coming after me when a whiny voice stops me. "What do you think you're doing?" I turn to the side and find Ashley glaring at me with her hands on her hips. "He's not interested in you. He's mine," she tells me.

I scoff at her bad attitude and keep on walking. I am so not in the mood to deal with her right now. "Hey," she calls after me, but I don't have the patience for her and keep moving.

The rage still flares through me and I find myself heading for the dirt road that leads in here. I pull my phone out and find a few missed calls from Brooke before I hit her number.

I hold the phone up to my ear and wait patiently.

"Where the hell have you been?" she questions. "I want to go to

Maxen's party."

I ignore her comments. "Can you come pick me up?" I question.

"Um... yeah. What do you think I was doing?"

"No," I tell her. "I'm not at home. Nate struck again."

"Oh, no," she says. "Where are you?"

I give her the directions and she promises to get here as soon as possible. I get myself as far away from the crowd and lights before finding a big ass rock to sit down on while I work on pulling apart every damn cigarette in the box before shoving the mess back inside and securely closing the lid.

After what feels like forever, her car finally comes down the dirt road. I jump up from the rock and wave her down as I'm sure it would be hard to see me in the dark, even with her headlights on.

"What the hell is this place?" she questions as I practically dive into the safety of her car.

"It's some sort of illegal racing track," I explain as she works on turning her car around.

"Shit," she grunts.

"Mhmm," I groan before telling her exactly what had happened tonight.

She looks over at me with a deep curiosity. "Why does he keep doing this stuff to you?"

I shake my head. "I honestly have no idea, but I wish he would stop."

Brooke is quiet for a moment before she lets out a heavy sigh. "I'm assuming you're bailing on Maxen's party?"

"Yeah," I say, giving her an apologetic smile. "I'm not feeling it."

"Ok," she says, a little disappointed. "I'll take you home."

"Actually," I say. "Can you take me back to Nate's? I have my clothes and my car to rescue, and while he's out, now's probably the best time to do it."

She nods in agreement before turning the music up and focusing on

the road before her. She pulls up at Nate's place soon after and I let out a sigh as I jump out of her car. "Have fun," I tell her. "Let me know if anything exciting happens."

"Alright," she smiles before turning hopeful. "It's not too late to change your mind."

"Still not going," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes and blows me a kiss. "Love you, party pooper."

"Love you, too," I laugh. "Remember to use protection."

With that, she pulls away and I hear her laughter flowing freely through her open window. As she disappears down the driveway, I turn around and face the big house.

A moment later, I push through the front door and head up the stairs to find my things. It's time to put this day to rest.

Chapter 8

I wake on Saturday morning feeling like absolute shit. My head aches, my body aches, and my poor little nose is all stuffy. I peel my eyes open into the bright light that's streaming into my room and groan as I push myself up to sitting. I'd say I've got the flu.

I reach across and hit the little circle button on my phone to see the time, but instead, I find a crapload of text messages and wonder how on earth I didn't hear my phone going off all night.

I grab my phone off the bedside table and bring my hands down into my lap as I read through them.

Josh – Baby. You coming?

Josh – Where are you?

Brooke – Holy crap! This party is awesome! Get your shit together and get down here!

Josh – I thought you wanted to party?

Brooke – OMG!!!!!! Dickhead just showed up. I think he's looking for you. OH NO! He's coming this way!!!! SAVE ME, TORA!!!!!!

Brooke – Yuuuup! Nate's definitely looking for you. You're in trouble, missy! He said something about his cigarettes.

Unknown – Where the hell are you, Tori?

Unknown – Tora?

Unknown – Damn it, Tora. Stop ignoring me. Where are you?

Josh – Did you seriously stand me up?

Brooke – BEST NIGHT EVER!!!!!!!!!!

I lay back down on my bed with a groan. First off. Josh can get stuffed. I'm not in the mood to deal with that crap right now. Second, I know it says unknown, but there's no mistaking who was sending those messages, and to be honest, I have no idea how the hell he found my number. It doesn't

matter anyway as that's another message I won't be responding to.

I bring my phone up above me and bring up a new text to Brooke.

Tora – Sorry I didn't respond to your messages. I was dead asleep. How'd your night go? Did you finally seal the deal with Maxen?

Brooke – Shit, Tora. What are you doing???? It's only nine in the morning!! No Maxen, he was a little busy with his head between Elle's legs. I'll catch him next time!

Tora – WHAT??? Elle strayed from the football team? NEVER!!!!

Brooke – I know! There's going to be trouble in cheer practice on Monday. Little miss pom-poms broke the rules! Speaking of the football team... Josh was looking for you all night... so was the broody asshole.

Tora – Ugh! Don't remind me. They can both go to hell!

Brooke – Whoa! Laying it on thick this morning.

Tora – Sorry, I'm not feeling well.

Brooke – THEN GO BACK TO SLEEP.

With that, I put my phone down beside me and close my eyes. My head continues to pound and my nose needs a good blow. Reluctantly, I peel myself off my bed and start searching through my desk drawers for the painkillers that I threw in here after the migraine I had a few weeks ago.

I find them sitting at the bottom of the drawer and grab them before heading into the bathroom for a glass of water. I send them straight down the hatch and work on blowing my nose before deciding I may as well take a nice hot shower.

I stand under the welcome stream of hot water, letting it wash away all my troubles... well, not really, the second I step out of the shower they're all going to be right where I left them, but at least in this box of steam, I can pretend.

I wash and condition my hair before shaving my legs. I mean, if I'm destined to feel like crap today then I might as well look good doing it.

I turn off the taps and reach for my towel before stepping out and looking at myself in the mirror. I get myself all dried up and wrap the towel

around me. I pull open the door and go to cross my room when I pull myself to an alarming stop at the person lying in my bed.

My mouth drops open as Jesse Ryder lays with his head squished into my pillow, watching me gawking back at him in my towel. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I shriek as I pull my towel tighter around me, pleased I decided not to strut out here in my birthday suit like I usually do.

“I’ve come to get you,” he tells me. “The order has been given and I will be delivering.”

My face scrunches up as I study him. “What are you talking about?”

“Nate wants you back at our place,” he explains.

“Ugh,” I groan before crossing the room towards my closet and searching through my clothes. “I’m sorry you got your ass out of bed and came over here, but it’s not going to happen. Nate is an asshole and if he wants me to play along with his twisted games, then he owes me an apology first.”

“Ha,” Jesse barks out. “That’s never going to happen.”

“Then you might as well get going,” I say, pulling out a pair of jeans and some underwear.

“Yeah... not going to happen,” he says, repeating himself.

As I slide my underwear up under my towel, something occurs to me. “Hey,” I say, sticking my head out around the corner to peer at him. “Why haven’t you made any sexual comments about me in a towel yet?”

He smirks as he watches me. “Would you like me to?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Answer the question, dipshit.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well,” he starts. “There are a few reasons. Number one. You had the balls to put me in my place yesterday. Not many of you girls do that, so from now on, you’ve got my respect. Number two. Seeing a chick walk around in a towel is not exactly a new thing to me.”

“Ugh,” I groan, cutting off whatever ridiculous thing he was about to follow that up with. “How are you such a whore already? You’re only sixteen.”

“Hey,” he defends. “I’ll be seventeen in two months.”

I shake my head in exasperation as I pull myself back into the safety of my closet and work on pulling up my jeans. “You’re an idiot.”

“Besides,” Jesse continues. “Nate would kick my ass if I kept up with the comments.”

“Huh?” I grunt. “How do you mean?”

“You didn’t notice my black eye?” he questions, making me shove my head back around the doorframe. “He wasn’t too pleased that I offered you my bed.”

My eyebrows pull down in confusion as I take in the slight bruising around Jesse’s left eye. “That doesn’t make any sense,” I tell him.

“It does,” he grunts with a knowing smirk that confuses me so much more. Jesse ignores the questioning look I send his way and reaches for my phone. “Could you hurry up?” he says. “I want to get home and go to bed.”

“You haven’t gone to bed yet?” I gasp.

“Nope. Maxen’s party is still going this morning. I only left when Nate demanded I pick your ass up.”

“Oh,” I grunt, taking in my phone that sits happily between his scrolling fingers. I clench my teeth together but decide to let it go. “So, you’re telling me you’re going to act like a decent human being towards me now?”

“Yep,” he says, popping the ‘p’.

“So, I guess I should probably do the same for you, huh?”

“Sure,” he says with a shrug, probably not giving a shit how I treat him.

I chuckle to myself as I start searching for a shirt. “In that case, you should probably know that I’m sick and your face is currently squished into the pillow I’ve been breathing on all night.”

“Ugh,” he says, throwing himself off the bed.

I ignore his grunting and groaning as I finish getting myself dressed. “I’m assuming you cavemen aren’t going to let me leave?” I ask.

“Nope.”

I let out a sigh and start packing a bag. “Here,” I say, throwing a bag at him and pointing towards a whole lot of my school things. I mean, if I’m going to be held hostage at their place then I better have something to do when I’m busy ignoring them, and I refuse to get behind on my school work. Not if I plan on getting into college.

Ten minutes later, we’re sitting in his Escalade and driving back to the Ryder home, the one place I really don’t want to be. “How come you get a car like this and Nate got a Camaro?” I question, looking around at all the differences.

“Believe me, mom and dad would have preferred he got an Escalade too, but he wanted that. They offer to buy one for him nearly every week but he refuses. He loves that Camaro,” he explains. “He bought it about a year ago and spent every weekend working on it so he could race it.

“Seriously?” I question as I try to wrap my head around his story. I mean, I did not take Nate as the kind of guy to spend his weekends like that. I expected wild partying and girls. Not working his ass off in the garage. “I always assumed his weekends were spent four inches deep.”

“Four inches?” Jesse laugh. “Give the guy some credit. He didn’t get his reputation by only having four inches.”

I roll my eyes and am pleased when my phone ringing draws the conversation away from Nate’s dick. I search through my bag until I find my phone and smile down at the screen when I see mom with an incoming video call.

I hit accept as fast as I can and hold the phone up before me. “Hi, mom,” I smile as the realization of just how much I miss her hits me. “How are you?”

“Good, sweetie. How are you?” she says through a bad connection as she sits in my Nanna’s living room beside my father. “I hope you’re behaving for Trish and Cade.”

“I am,” I tell her, ignoring the scoff from Jesse beside me. “What are you guys doing?”

“We’re just check-” she cuts herself off. “Are you in a car?”

At that, my father’s face appears on the screen as he looks at my

surroundings. “Yeah, I’m with Jesse,” I tell them before turning the phone towards Jesse then back to me.

“Oh, that’s lovely. How is he? Is he doing well?” Mom asks.

“Ask him yourself. He can hear you, you know?”

Mom rolls her eyes as Jesse responds. “I’m doing fine Mrs. Roberts.”

Mom gives an affectionate smile while placing her hand on her chest. Her whole face suddenly changes as the hand on her chest covers her mouth and a gasp comes sailing out. “Are you two on a date?”

“What?” I shriek as Jesse starts laughing. “No, mom. Jesse doesn’t date women. He objectifies them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says with a shake of her head. “Though, from memory, it was always Nathaniel you had a crush on.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say as Jesse laughs even harder. “Nate is more of a pig than Jesse is. I’d prefer to date a doormat.”

“Oh, stop,” mom scolds. “Those boys are the sweetest boys I’ve ever met. You’d be lucky to have either one of them.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m going to hang up now,” I tell her.

“Oh, fine,” she groans. “I’ll check in with you later.”

“Alright, mom. I love you guys.

“Love you too, angel,” my father says as mom starts blowing kisses towards the screen. “Love you, sweetie. Be good,” she finally says before ending the call.

I put my phone back in my lap and look over at Jesse who’s busy smirking at me. “What?” I grunt as I narrow my eyes on him.

“You know Nate isn’t as bad as you think he is,” he tells me.

“Are you delusional? I know he’s your big brother and all, but seriously? He’s done nothing but torture me for the past few years,” I remind him.

“There’s a method to his madness,” he says. “He took you to the race last night so you wouldn’t go to the party.”

“What?” I grunt. “Why the hell not?”

“Because your quarterback was bragging how he was going to get you drunk so he could fuck you.”

My eyes widen in shock as I watch Jesse pull into the 24/7 diner. “What?” I screech. “He did not.”

“I’m sorry to break it to you, Tora, but he did. The guy is a loser.”

I let out a sigh. “Well, that would explain why he told everyone we’re dating.”

“Wait. So, you guys aren’t actually dating?” Jesse asks.

“No,” I scoff with distaste. “I mean, we made out at a few parties and he flirts a bit at school, but that’s about it.”

“Hmm,” he says to himself before opening the door and sliding out.

I hop out of the car and hurry around to Jesse’s side. “I don’t get it though. Why would it matter to Nate if I was going to go to that party or not? Aren’t you guys all for screwing random chicks at parties?”

Jesse pauses at the door of the diner with his hand resting on the handle as he looks back at me. “Look, we’re assholes, but we’re not complete assholes,” he says. “We draw lines at screwing girls who have drunk more than they can handle. Josh was going to take advantage of you and that doesn’t sit well with us, especially not with Nate.”

“Why especially not Nate?” I question as he pushes his way through the door.

“He’s got a soft spot for you.”

“Ok,” I laugh. “Now I know you’re lying.”

“Trust me,” he says with a secret in his eyes. “Every single time he’s been a dick, there’s been a reason behind it.”

I fall silent as millions of confusing and conflicting thoughts swarm my mind. I mean, what the hell is going on here? It’s not possible that Nate would have been doing something nice for me. It’s a thought I completely refuse to believe.

Jesse walks over to a booth before indicating for me to follow. He shoves a menu in my hands before getting busy skimming over the pages of his own. “What are you having?” he questions a moment later.

“I’m not hungry,” I tell him.

Jesse pulls out his phone, presses a few buttons, and slides it across the table to me. “Too bad,” he tells me. I look down at the phone to see a chain of text messages between Nate and Jesse.

Nate – Get Tora and give her breakfast. Make sure she eats every last bite.

Jesse – Seriously? Forget about her. I’m still partying.

Nate – Tough shit. Go now.

Jesse – Fine. You fucking owe me.

Nate – Code for the gate is 1005.

Jesse – Dude! How the fuck do you know that?

Nate – Get on with it.

“Huh,” I grunt to myself before sliding the phone back over to him.

I mean, does he like me?

No. That couldn’t be. It has to be something else. Something is going on here that I just can’t work out as it doesn’t make sense for Nate to be looking out for me.

I mean, yes, he saved me from Josh’s dirty plans by taking me to the race, but he didn’t have to be such an ass about it. He could have just said ‘Hey, Tora. I heard Josh saying this. Maybe it’s a good idea to stay away’ in which I would have said, ‘Oh, thanks. I was planning on skipping the party anyway.’

He also forces me to eat as though he gives a shit.

This makes no sense.

“So, what’ll it be?” Jesse says, indicating to the menu with a nod of his head.

I let out a heavy sigh. “I’ll go with the pancakes.”

“Good choice,” he grins.

Forty minutes later, we walk out of the diner after having Jesse scoff down his breakfast and wait patiently until I finished my whole plate. Though, he did threaten that if I didn’t eat it he was going to jam it down my

throat. Apparently, he's worked out my little secret, otherwise, Nate has spilled the beans.

We get back in his car and he drives us back to his place. Before we know it, we're there and Jesse is walking my bag of things all the way up to my room, he even manages to place it down nicely on my bed. I thank him and he excuses himself to sleep the day away.

Nate's bedroom door is closed and I have absolutely no idea if he's in there or not, and quite frankly, I don't think I want to know.

I'm way too confused by him right now.

So, with Jesse out of the picture for the rest of the day and Nate hopefully, somewhere else, I grab my Kindle and my phone and head down into the den. I make myself comfortable on the couch, making sure to stay away from the one that Nate was entertaining on the other night, and I prop my feet up.

Actually, come to think of it; there could be all sorts of DNA covering this couch. A shudder rushes through me and I run back up to my room, grab the blanket off my bed, and lay it down on the couch before climbing in for the afternoon.

I grab my Kindle and finally give myself a chance to finish my book.

Chapter 9

It's well past three in the afternoon and I have had at least a hundred text message from the people at school, each and every one of them asking if the rumors are true.

One. Am I living with the famous Ryder brothers?

Two. Was I the girl who was at Nate's race?

Three. Was I or was I not on a date with Jesse this morning?

Four. Did I actually sleep with Josh at Maxen's party?

Five. Did I declare war against Ashley because I'm trying to steal her boyfriend?

I address them all and set the story straight. Yes, I'm staying with Nate and Jesse against my will. No, I'm not dating either of them. Yes, I was at Nate's race. No, I'm not dating or sleeping with Josh. And hell no, I'm not trying to steal Ashley's boyfriend.

I've been lucky that I still haven't laid eyes on him since the race... or maybe he's the lucky one as I have a few choice words to say to him regarding that whole situation.

I've hardly seen Jesse either, except for when he barged into the den with a plate of lunch and sat there until it was completely gone. The second it was, he picked up the plate and disappeared.

It's been just me since then, and to be honest, I kind of like it that way.

A text message draws my attention away from my shopping cart on my laptop and down to my phone where I find a text from Brooke.

Brooke – Hey skank. I just heard you slept with Josh, Nate, and Jesse all in the same night. How the hell did you get so lucky?

My blood boils.

Tora – Are you serious?

Brooke – Yep. What are you doing? Can I come over?

I go to hash out a reply when I remember that this is not my home. I bring up Trish's number that she demanded I store in my phone for just in case and hit call.

I bring the phone to my ear and wait patiently for her to answer. "Tora, honey. Is everything ok?"

"Yeah, hi," I say. "I just wanted to quickly ask if it was ok for me to have a friend over?"

"Oh, of course, sweetheart," she says with a proud smile in her voice. "Do you have any idea how nice it is to have somebody ask me that? My boys haven't asked me permission to do anything in the last ten years."

"I can imagine," I laugh.

"Now, listen, Tori. Did the boys tell you that Cade and I are out for the night?"

"Um, no," I say slowly.

"We have a benefit dinner out of town for Cade's work so we won't be home until tomorrow afternoon, but I've left money on the counter so you guys can order a pizza."

"Ok," I smile.

"I have to run, but make sure those boys get to bed at a decent hour, alright."

"Alright," I laugh. "I'll try, but I'm not making any promises."

"Ok, sweetie," she says. "I'll see you tomorrow."

With that, she hangs up the phone and I get straight back to messaging Brooke

Tora – Sure. I've been kidnapped again though, so unless you're brave enough to walk through these doors, then I'll see you in a bit.

Naturally, Brooke's curiosity is far too great and has her buzzing at the gate within the space of five minutes. I run around the house, trying to figure out how the hell to open the stupid thing. It takes me a few minutes and I giggle to myself as I watch Brooke through the monitor looking ever so impatient.

Once I work it out, I meet her at the door and she barges her way in. I mean, Nate and Jesse have had plenty of parties here before, but this is different. When no one is here, it's private. This isn't the open home of a party, this is the privacy of the Ryder household. The one which holds all their secrets, not that I've really discovered any yet, only that Jesse isn't as much of an ass as I thought. The jury is still out on Nate.

This is the place girls all over Broken Hill are dying to get a look at. They all want to be a part of these boys' lives and if just getting a little look inside is all their going to get, then you better believe they'll take the opportunity with both hands and hold on tight.

"This place is huge," Brooke says from the front entrance.

"What are you talking about?" I grunt. "You've been here before."

"I know," she says as she walks deeper into the house. "But that was when there were people everywhere. It looks so much bigger now."

I roll my eyes at her logic and lead her up the stairs to my room. "Oh my god," she whisper yells beside me. "Is this where they sleep?"

"Yes," I laugh pointing out the doors. "That's Jesse's room up the hallway and Nate's right here."

She jumps away from the door right beside her as if she's about to get herpes from being too close, though, I wouldn't be surprised. That room is probably crawling with diseases. "Are they here?" she questions.

I shrug my shoulders as I push into my room. "I don't know," I tell her. "Jesse was earlier but I haven't seen him since lunchtime, and I haven't seen Nate since the race."

"Oh," she says with a grin. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go snooping."

"No way," I laugh. "Can you imagine the things he'd do to me if he found out I was in his room?"

"Come on," she says. "Stop being a chicken shit. Live a little."

I shake my head. "By all means," I tell her, indicating towards his door. "Have at it, but I'm staying here."

She's gone within the blink of an eye.

I get myself dressed into a tank and shorts as I listen to Brooke roaming around his room. I hear the noises of doors opening and closing before the sounds of drawers sliding forward and back. A few minutes later, Brooke comes storming back in. “Holy shit,” she laughs. “I went into the bad boy’s dungeon and came out unscathed.”

“Congratulations,” I laugh. “You should get that printed on a shirt.”

She rolls her eyes as she notices my dress change. “Why are you getting all dressed up?” she questions.

“I’m not,” I tell her. “It’s a nice day so I thought we could sit out by the pool and get a little sun.”

“Sounds good to me,” she says before peeking through my clothes. “Did you pack your bikini? I wouldn’t mind swimming.”

“Oh yeah,” I say, as I dig it out and then a second for me. I hand it over and a few minutes later, we’re out the door with our bikini’s on underneath.

“So?” I say as we get to the stairs and start making our way down. “Were you going to tell me about your visit to the evil spawn’s sex closet?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know anything about it,” she tells me.

“Nu-uh,” I say, shaking my head. “Just because I didn’t want to go snooping through it, doesn’t mean I don’t want to know all about it.”

“Ok,” she laughs as I lead her to the back door. “Well, for starters, it’s a lot cleaner than I thought it would be. Aren’t teenage guy’s rooms usually really messy?” she asks.

“Um, I don’t know. Maybe?”

She shrugs her shoulders and continues with her recap. “Well, I was expecting used condoms and food to be scattered everywhere, but it’s actually really clean. Don’t get me wrong, there were three boxes of condoms in his side table.” I roll my eyes as she continues. “His closet is super tidy, his bed was made, even his bathroom was clean.”

“Don’t tell me you were snooping through his bathroom,” I groan.

“Hell yeah,” she laughs. “There wasn’t even a single hair that I could steal so I could clone him and make a bad boy of my own.”

I scrunch up my face. “Where the hell do you come up with this shit?” I laugh. She shrugs her shoulders again, but I find myself wanting to know more. “You’re telling me there wasn’t anything interesting in there?”

“Well,” she says. “He had a scrapbook of drawings.”

“Drawings?” I grunt. “What the hell is he drawing?”

“Cars,” she says.

“Cars?” I grunt.

“Will you stop copying me?” she snaps. “But yes, they were drawings of cars.”

My eyebrows pull down in curiosity. “What kind of cars?” I ask.

“I don’t know, like old cars that he made look new. They all had different designs and stuff,” she says as she tries to figure out how to explain it.

We get out by the pool and start peeling off our clothes. “Maybe he wants to get into restoring old cars,” I say as I fall down into the poolside chair and think about how Jesse had told me that he had practically built his car so he could race it.

“Makes sense,” she grunts before launching into her rundown of Maxen’s party. “You know, Josh must have found me at least ten different times looking for you.”

“Ugh,” I groan, not really giving two shits about the Josh stories as I’m far too relaxed with the sun beaming down on my skin. “Jesse told me this morning that he was bragging about getting me drunk and sleeping with me.”

“Really?” she says in distaste. “That would explain why he was so desperate to find you.”

“Uh huh,” I groan as I silently wish I had brought my sunglasses down with me.

“I think it’s time you dropped that one. I mean, he’s telling everyone you’re together now and it’s probably so you’re easier to get into bed.”

“Believe me, I know,” I say. “I mean, it was fun at first when it was all about pushing Elle’s buttons, but now, he’s just an ass.”

“Agreed,” she laughs, “But speaking of Elle...” she says with a wicked grin.

“Was she really with Maxen last night?” I laugh.

“That’s what the rumors are telling me,” she says as noises start coming from deep inside the house. I try to block it out but can’t when I hear the back door sliding open. “Looks like we’ve got company,” Brooke murmurs quietly beside me.

I look over to find, not only Nate and Jesse, but their three followers as well with all of their eyes casting up and down the length of our bodies. Maxen, Parker, and Tyson all have sleazy grins on their faces as though it’s their lucky day while Nate just stares at me as though I’ve pissed him off. Jesse, though, he’s too busy giggling at his phone to even realize we’re here.

I find it impossible to tear the scowl off my face until Nate pulls out a familiar box of cigarettes. I want to curse at him for going through my things to find it, but then watching as he opens it up and goes to grab one only to find the mess I left for him is just too good.

Nate’s eyes narrow on me as he squeezes his fist and crumples the box in one easy go. He throws it over his shoulder and I can’t help the smug smile that sits on my lips. I mean, the one being the asshole is so much better than being on the receiving end of it.

“Well, if it isn’t Brooke and Tora,” Maxen says as they reach us. I feel the need to cover up but from the way Brooke is smiling back at me, I get the feeling she’s wanting to show off. Maxen takes a seat at the end of my sunbed and faces Brooke. “What are you ladies doing?”

I reach down beside me and grab my shorts off the ground before sitting up and sliding them up my legs. Parker falls down in the chair beside me while Tyson takes a seat at the end of Brooke’s. “Soaking up some sun,” she smiles. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Just chilling,” Maxen tells her as I watch Nate walk up around the back of my chair and lean forward onto his elbows, making my nerves reach levels they’ve never quite reached before. “I haven’t been to sleep yet.”

Brooke grins at him before shuffling over in her sunbed. “You’re more than welcome to lay here with me,” she tells him.

“You’re on, babe,” he says before getting up and laying down beside her. Brooke sits up a bit so he can slide his arm around her and before I know it, they’re snuggled and comfortable.

I can’t help but laugh at my friend as my nerves slowly settle back down. I can only imagine that she’d be in absolute heaven right now, especially with the way his fingertips are trailing over the skin of her toned waist. I reach up and accidentally graze my arm across Nate’s as I put my hair up in a bun and find myself cringing with how good it felt to touch him.

That shouldn’t be happening. I should feel disgusted, not turned on, but I can’t stop thinking about what Jesse had said this morning. He had my back with Josh.

I try to tune him out, but he’s right there. I mean, if I just look up and tilt my chin up to him, I could probably kiss him.

Damn it, Tora. No.

“I’m getting a drink,” Jesse says to the group with his attention still drawn to his phone. “Anyone want one?”

“Yeah,” Nate says. “Get some for the girls.”

Say what? Surely, I couldn’t have heard that right.

“Girls?” Jesse says as his head snaps up and he finally pays attention. “Oh shit. I didn’t even see you guys there,” he says before he takes in the bikini tops. He winks at me with a knowing grin. “Looking good, Tora.”

“Jess,” Nate scolds.

Jesse holds up both hands and backs away with a laugh, making me wonder why the hell he’d said that. This morning he’d told me that he was full of respect from now on. The only reason would be if he was wanting to stir shit with Nate.

The guys talk about the party last night and I find myself tuning out and grabbing my phone off the ground. I don’t know what I’m doing or why, but I open a new text and start typing to the guy behind me.

Tora – I know why you took me to the race last night... thanks.

Without hitting send, I silently hand my phone back to him with butterflies in my stomach and an intense dread I’ve never felt before. This is

either going to be bad or really bad.

A moment later, he hands it back.

Nate – Don't know what you're talking about.

I could go on to explain how I know that he had tried to save me being Josh's latest conquest, but I have a feeling he would deny it and say something about just wanting to scare the shit out of me on the track.

So, instead. I call him out.

Tora – Liar. Jesse has a big mouth.

I hand the phone back and a second later, he sighs. I wait a while for a response and fear that maybe he's just stolen my phone when it finally comes back over my shoulder.

Nate – You shouldn't be dating a guy like Josh. He's only interested in one thing.

Tora – Reminds me of someone else I know! I'm not dating Josh. He made it up. I had no intentions of going to that party.

I hand him back the phone and it's returned a moment later with a blank screen. I feel a little disappointed that he didn't write anything back, but then, I shouldn't. I should be pleased that I got it out of the way. I've said my peace, I thanked him for watching my back, now it's time to move on.

Jesse comes out a moment later, juggling as many bottles as he can possibly fit in his hands and arms, hell, there's even a few jammed into the pockets of his jeans. Parker gets up and helps while I let out a breath of relief that there's a distraction from the brooding guy behind me.

"I invited a few people over," Jesse tells everyone, prompting the guys to get on their phones and start hashing out text messages.

Nate groans from behind me. "Great. Another fucking party," he says under his breath.

I relax back into my chair and get comfortable as it looks like I'll be here for a while.

Half an hour later, the whole house and back yard is swarming with people. It's turned into one of the biggest pool parties I've ever seen. I'd say my whole senior year is here along with people from the public school.

Music is blaring, Courtney and Bec have shown up, and drinks are flowing. I usually don't like to drink at parties as I prefer to drive, but seeing as though I'll be staying here tonight, I take my chance to finally let loose. I can worry about all my problems tomorrow.

Chapter 10

I sit on my sunbed with Courtney and Bec while Brooke continues making out with Maxen on the bed beside us, just as she's been doing for the past hour.

I'm happy Courtney and Bec showed up when they did as I had just finished the drink that Jesse had given me earlier and they instantly replaced it. I haven't needed to get up since.

I'm so chill right now. I've got a good buzz going, Nate left me alone, I feel hella sexy in my bikini, and I've got my girls by my side.

We laugh and I get so lost in our conversation that I don't even notice the cheerleaders have arrived with the whole football team. I let out a heavy sigh. I'm not ready for the fun to be sucked out of this party.

Josh is there by my side in an instant. I don't miss the way his eyes travel up and down the length of my body before landing on the drink in my hand and grinning.

He pushes his way onto the sunbed next to me, forcing Courtney to have to move down. "Hey, babe," he says as he grabs my waist and hoists me on top of his lap before I get a chance to pull away. He wraps his arms around me and presses a kiss to my cheek. "Where have you been? You weren't at the party last night."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," I tell him with a cringe. "I couldn't make it."

"It's fine. You're here now," he says as he tries to pull me in for a kiss.

I pull back with a cringe. "No, don't," I tell him, really not wanting to continue this little thing we have going here. I mean, it's definitely run its course. I don't know what I was thinking having a crush on him for the past year. "I'm sick," I explain. "I've got the flu."

"Ugh," he groans, pulling back slightly. "So, what are you doing here if you're not well?"

"Haven't you heard?" I ask with a sigh. "I kind of live here now."

Well, at least temporarily.”

“What?” he questions as his eyes darken. “With Nate and Jesse?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you have a bedroom upstairs then?”

I let out a frustrated groan as I try to push myself off him. “It’s not happening, Josh. Not now, not ever,” I tell him. “I know you’re just trying to get me in bed, and quite honestly, I’m not interested.”

I finally get myself off him and he scoffs as he gets to his feet. “Whatever,” he says with a laugh. “You’re too much work anyway. You would have been a dead root.”

My eyes follow him as he leaves only to find a different pair of dark eyes already cast on mine. I should have expected it, yet every time, he catches me off guard. Nate would have just seen that whole thing between me and Josh and from the way he’s not glaring at me, I’d dare say he’s pleased I just got rid of him.

Feeling good, me and the girls get ourselves up and start making our way around the party. We say hi to all our friends and dance amongst the other bodies. The whole time, I feel Nate’s eyes on me, but not specifically on my eyes, they’re roaming all over my body, making me feel extremely exposed.

I go back and check on Brooke a few times but she’s absolutely fine messing around with Maxen.

I walk into the kitchen to pour myself another drink when I find Nate with Ashley up against the wall. Her legs are wrapped around his waist and his hands are firmly on her ass as they make out.

A fierce jealousy cuts through me and has me choking on my own breath. Where the hell did that come from? “Woah, babe,” Jesse says from beside me as he claps a hand on my back to stop me from choking. “You all good?”

His question has Nate breaking away from Ashley to find out what’s going on, and I hate that he sees me right now. “Yeah,” I say, looking at the table and focusing on pouring a drink so I can avoid meeting Nate’s eyes. “I’m good.”

I pour my drink before his voice draws my attention away. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

I look up to find him staring straight at me with a very disgruntled Ashley in his arms. “Don’t you think you should find a room?” I snap.

An ‘ooh’ sounds around us and it takes me a moment to realize what I’ve just done. Nobody challenges Nate Ryder, especially in front of a crowd like this. That’s a lesson I’ve learned the hard way. I mean, over the last few days it’s been fine when it’s just me and him, but in front of people, that’s a big no-no.

He steps away from Ashley as his eyes narrow on me and comes right up in front of me. The butterflies in my stomach take flight and I find myself looking up into his eyes, meeting his challenge.

I don’t know what it is. Maybe I’ve had a few too many drinks or maybe I’ve just gotten used to screaming at him over the last few days. Either way, I’m not backing down and he sees that clear in my eyes.

Nate’s so close to me that with the slightest movement, I’d be touching him. He reaches out his hand and takes the bottle from my fingers while searching my eyes. “Don’t make me do it,” he begs for only me to hear.

I’ve been in this situation many times before to know that this is not how it goes. This is usually where he’d call me out and put me down. He’d say something to make everyone laugh or try to make me feel small but never has he asked me to back down.

I see it clear as day. He doesn’t want to hurt me. He has no problem kidnapping me, scaring me or yelling at me, but hurting me... that’s different.

Things are changing.

A part of me wants to know what he’s going to do if I don’t back down, but then, another part is screaming at me to let him off the hook.

“Alright, boys and girls,” Jesse says situating himself between us and pushing Nate back a step and trying to put out the fire. “We all need to get along if we plan on living together for the foreseeable future.”

Nate allows Ashley to pull him back and I let out a breath.

Situation resolved. Both Nate and I got away from that one without having to back down. Points all around. I think that deserves another drink. I grab the discarded bottle off the table and finish pouring my drink. I bolt out of there with my drink in hand before Nate has a chance to light another fire under my ass.

By the time I get back outside, the party seems to have doubled. The sun has gone down and the music is turned right up.

As I make my way back over to Courtney and Bec, I get stopped by a tiny little cheerleader in a string bikini. She grins up at me with her hands on her hips. I try to step around her but she blocks me again. “Heard you were getting around last night.”

“Excuse me?” I grunt.

“Is it not enough for you to break the rules with Josh? You had to take Nate and Jesse too,” Elle sneers.

“First off. I couldn’t give a shit about Josh. He’s a loser and I was only messing with him to get under your skin, and apparently, it worked. I was never dating him. Second. I haven’t taken Nate and Jesse. I couldn’t be any less interested.”

“Whatever,” she scoffs. “I knew you were a slut and now you’ve proven it. I’m curious though,” she says with a grin. “How do you make it work? Do you alternate beds each night or do they just come to you?”

I step into her, letting her see the fire within me. “What’s wrong Elle? Are you jealous that I have all these boys pining for my attention? I mean, I had the quarterback all over me when everyone knows he’s supposed to want you, yet it’s obvious he won’t go anywhere near you. And as for Nate and Jesse? Well, it’s pretty clear you couldn’t get your claws in there. You had to scoop the bottom of the barrel and open your legs for Maxen instead. You know Nate and Jesse don’t share right? You’ve just shot down your chances with them.”

Her whole face turns bright red and within the blink of an eye, she throws her cherry red drink all over me. I gasp as a hundred people around me gasp as well.

I have two options here. I can either run away and cry about it, or I

can own it.

I choose option two.

I've never been a violent person so when my hand slaps across the side of her petite face, I think I'm even more shocked than she is, though I don't show it.

She gasps and covers a hand over her stinging face before being the one to run away in tears. "Fuck, that was hot," Jesse says as he laughs and throws his arm over my shoulder.

I roll my eyes and step out from under him as I take another sip of my drink. I step towards the pool and hand him my drink. "I think it's time to cool off," I smile before launching myself into the freezing water and letting the red sticky drink wash off my skin.

"Hell, yeah," Jesse cheers before throwing my drink over his shoulder and running full bolt towards the pool. I squeal as he launches himself into the air and over the top of me before bombing into the water and splashing all the hoity-toity girls around us.

Within two seconds, the pool is packed with bodies and I find myself on Jesse's shoulders wresting Brooke who sits upon Maxen's.

I've never had so much fun at a party in my life. I mean this is ridiculous. I'm even brave enough to say that maybe Jesse is becoming a friend, just like we used to be when we were kids. I've missed his friendship and I guess after all these years all I had to do was let him know he's an idiot. Nate though, that's going to need a lot of mending before we can get the same friendship we used to have, in fact, that bridge might be well and truly burned.

It's well past midnight when Maxen stands and takes Brooke's hand before disappearing upstairs. She looks back at me with a wink and I can't help but laugh. I also can't help but wonder which of the three rooms upstairs they'll be taking and I hope to god it's not mine.

Some people have disappeared from the party but that doesn't change the fact that it's still ridiculously huge. Pizzas were ordered so I guess we can still tell the boys' parents that we ate pizza for dinner without actually lying, but as for the rest... I don't know.

I'm standing by the pool with Courtney, laughing as Bec twerks and grinds her ass into some guy we don't know with a major smile on her face. "I'm going to be hearing about this all day tomorrow," Courtney tells me with a laugh.

"I know," I agree with a laugh as I spy Jesse just behind them, taking a girl by the hand and leading her away. "You better watch her closely or she'll end up going home with him."

Courtney rolls her eyes as chasing around after Bec when she's had too much to drink has become the norm for these two. It's a routine Courtney knows all too well, though, Bec does it just as much for her too.

I lift my cup to my mouth and notice a guy sitting across the pool watching me and Courtney, and honestly, even though it's dark, I can tell from a mile away that he's hot. I don't know him though so he must be from the public school.

With the liquor going through my body, I find myself smiling at him. He grins and rises out of his chair before making his way around the pool. "Wowza," Courtney says from beside me.

"Oh yeah," I agree.

The guy comes over and stops beside me. "Hey," he says, offering me his hand. "I'm Jackson. I don't think I've met you before."

"No, I don't think so either," I tell him as I take his hand. "I'm Tora."

"Tora?" he questions, bringing my hand up and pressing the softest kiss to my skin. "That's different."

I look up at him while giving him my best man-eating smile. "Yeah, my-"

Courtney clears her throat and cuts me off. "I think I hear Bec calling." She grins and backs away, leaving me alone with Mr. Ladies' Man.

The second we're alone, Jackson steps into me and brings his hand up. He runs it down the side of my face and sends shivers all over my body. "You want to get out of here?"

I step away as my back stiffens. I wasn't expecting that. I was hoping for a little flirting, maybe an intense make-out session, but not to be asked to

leave with him within the first two seconds of meeting. “Wow,” I say to mask my unease. “You’re confident.”

“I know,” he says, moving forward again. “What do you say?”

“I-”

A warm hand wraps around my bare waist sending shivers all over my body as a wall of muscle moves in behind me. My back stiffens again, but this time it’s for a whole different reason. “Is there a problem?” Nate asks from my back with his chest vibrating against my burning skin, but the tone in his voice is anything but friendly.

His hand on my waist skims across my skin and his fingers slip into the waistband of my shorts before spreading them out and claiming as much of my skin as possible.

Jackson looks down and takes in Nate’s arm around my waist. “Yeah,” he tells Nate as he indicates to me with his eyes darkening. “We were just leaving.”

His comments have Nate’s hold tightening around me. “You mean you were just leaving. She stays,” he tells Jackson.

Jackson scoffs at Nate before he looks back at me, expecting me to leave with him and from his arrogance and confidence, I assume he’s at the top of his school, probably on the football team too. “Come on, babe,” Jackson says, reaching out for me.

In the blink of an eye, Nate steps forward and I somehow end up tucked safely behind him, with his arm reaching back, still holding onto me. I place my hand on his strong back and peer around him. “You were leaving,” Nate reminds him in a tone that I’ve never been so unlucky to be on the receiving end of.

Jackson’s eyes flick to mine before going back to Nate’s when he raises his hands and backs away. “There’s easier pussy around here anyway.”

With that, Jackson is gone and Nate is spinning around to face me with a glare. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he questions, still with his hand on my waist, though, at least his fingers are no longer dipping into my shorts.

“What do you mean?” I argue. “All I did was smile at the guy.”

“Do you have any idea who that was?”

I shrug my shoulder. “Should I?”

“That’s Jackson Millington,” he snaps as though that name must mean something to me. He snatches his hand away from my waist. “He’s public enemy number one. He would have taken you out of here, fucked you even when you said no and left you bloodied and broken in a gutter somewhere.”

Well... shit. “I wasn’t going to leave with him,” I tell him.

“You think you could have stopped him?” he questions as he lets out a frustrated huff before taking a few calming breaths. “You gave him ‘the look’,” he tells me.

“‘The look’?” I scoff. “What the fuck is ‘the look’?”

“Oh, come on,” he says. “Don’t act like you don’t know ‘the look’.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Please enlighten me, oh wise one.”

Jesse walks by us with the girl still in his arms, trying to give us a wide berth as to not have to deal with our bickering again, but unfortunately for him, it’s never that easy. Nate launches out and grips him around the front of his shirt before pulling him in front of me. “Explain to her what ‘the look’ is.”

“Oh,” Jesse laughs. “That’s an easy one. It’s how you chicks let us know you’re down.”

“What?” I grunt.

“Yeah,” he says with a smirk. “You’ve got a killer look. It’s all in your eyes. It’s enough to make any red-blooded man har-” Nate gives him a hard shove, pushing him away and cutting off the crude thing he was about to say before he looks down at me expectantly.

“You’re an idiot,” I tell him.

“A thank you would be nice,” he says in a smug tone.

“You don’t deserve a thank you. What if I wanted to go with him?”

His jaw clenches and his dark eyes narrow. “Now who’s being an idiot.”

“You’re impossible,” I tell him, wanting nothing more than to stomp my foot and cross my arms, so instead of embarrassing myself, I just huff and storm away, which I realize, after the fact, that I’ve still managed to embarrass myself.

With my party spirit broken, I say goodnight to Courtney and Bec before heading for the stairs. “Where do you think you’re going?” Jesse calls out behind me. “The party is only just getting started.”

I shake my head. “I’m out,” I tell him.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Suit yourself,” he says before giving all his attention to the keg that he and Tyson are trying to bust open.

I head up the stairs and get just outside of my room when I hear moans and Maxen’s name being called out by my best friend. I let out a sigh, realizing that they’re in my bed.

I walk further up the hallway until I can’t hear them anymore and lean against the wall before sliding all the way down to the ground. I guess this is where I’ll be staying tonight.

I pull out my phone as my Kindle is in my room and pull up my Kindle app before getting lost in my book. I must be up here for at least an hour when Nate makes an appearance at the top of the stairs in a soaking wet shirt. “What the fuck are you doing?” he questions as he takes me in, sprawled out on the floor.

“Reading,” I tell him.

His eyebrows pull down. “I forgot you did that,” he tells me. “Why the hell are you doing it out here?” Just then, Brooke screams out Maxen’s name again and there’s no longer a need for my response. “Right, ok,” he says as he walks to his door and unlocks it. “You might as well sleep in my bed. Max is going to have her in there all night.”

I gawk at him. “There’s no way I’m sleeping in your bed.”

“It’s not like I’m going to be in there with you,” he tells me with a grunt.

I consider it for a moment. I’m super tired and I’m terrified of falling asleep on the ground up here during a party. I mean, you never know what kind of losers will be wandering around. But then, could I really take another

person's bed? Of course, I can. "Fine," I say as I get myself up off the floor.

He opens the door and I follow him in. Nate goes straight for his closet while I study his bed. "Are you going to keep looking at it or were you going to get in?"

I cringe as I continue looking at it and realize that there could have been hundreds of girls in here. With that thought, I start pulling all the sheets off his bed. "What are you doing?" he questions as he rips his shirt off and starts pulling on another.

"I'm happy for you to sleep in pools of your own DNA, but I won't be doing it."

He rolls his eyes and I keep working until the mattress is completely bare. I smile at my handiwork before climbing on. "Here," Nate says.

I turn around just in time to see a shirt flying towards me. I reach out and pluck it out of the sky. "What's this for?" I question.

"Something to sleep in," he says. "I doubt you'll be comfortable in a bikini."

I look down and realize he's right. "Thanks," I murmur.

He nods his head and a second later, he's out the door.

I close the door behind him before going into his bathroom and getting myself ready for bed. I pull his shirt over my head and find that I really like how it feels against my skin. Though it's not the fabric I like, it's the fact that it's his.

Shit. What's happening to me?

I get myself comfortable in bed and squish my head into his pillows.

I'm just about asleep when the door flies open before Ashley comes barging in. She stops in her tracks and looks me over in her boyfriend's bed, wearing her boyfriend's shirt. "You slut," she yells as her face goes bright red.

She storms out before giving me a chance to explain and I start to get up to go after her when I realize that I don't actually care. She's not my problem and I haven't done anything wrong. This is all on Nate.

Feeling good about that decision, I close my eyes and finally drift off

to sleep.

Chapter 11

Loud noises in the hallway startle me out of my sleep. I fly up until I'm sitting when I truly start to listen. The music is still blaring downstairs so the voices are extra loud. It doesn't take me long to work out that it's not just a loud conversation but a fight.

I don't recognize the female's voice very well but the male is as clear as day. After all, it's the voice that has yelled and taunted me so many times before. "You're such a dick," the girl snaps at him. "How many times are you going to cheat on me before I get smart enough to leave your sorry ass?"

And it all makes sense.

It's Ashley screaming at Nate, clearly pissed off about me being in his bed. Obviously, she thinks he's been cheating on her with me, unless she caught him doing something else during the party, though, I wouldn't be surprised.

"For fuck's sake, Ashley," he says back to her with a deep groan. "How many times do I need to tell you? You're not my girlfriend. I can't cheat on a girl who's not my girlfriend."

Oh... that gets my attention.

"Nate," she demands. "Don't do this again."

"I told you from the start," he says. "I don't do the girlfriend/boyfriend shit. You've never been my girlfriend nor will you ever be. You agreed that you were cool with that. That's the only reason we're even doing this."

"But... I thought..."

"What? You thought what?" he scoffs. "That'd I'd change my mind and fall madly in love you?"

"Well..."

"Never going to happen, babe," he laughs.

Ooooh, ouch. This shit is juicy... and brutal.

“No, Nate. Please,” she says. “Please. I promise. I’ll stop calling you my boyfriend.”

“Nah, sorry, babe. I’m done with this shit. You’re too much drama.”

“Nate,” she calls as the door to the room is barged open.

I gasp at the sudden intrusion as he slams the door closed behind him and turns on the light before flicking the lock. “Shit,” he says as he looks down at me sitting in his bed. “I forgot you were in here.”

“Ahhh... yeah,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself to try and keep warm. His eyes linger on me and it almost looks as though he’s enjoying the sight of me in his bed, wearing his shirt.

The thought is ripped away by a loud banging on the door followed by Ashley’s screams. “Nate. Open the damn door. I’m not done with you.”

“Well, I’m done with you,” he calls back with a smirk on his handsome face and an attitude so sharp it could cut through metal. He turns back to me with a cringe. “I, um... I suppose you heard all that.”

“How could I not? My parents probably heard it in Australia,” I say. “That was harsh, though. It was like one hell of a mad dumping.”

“No,” he corrects. “I thought you could hear it. It’s not dumping when you were never together,” he explains before cringing when Ashley bangs on the door again. “She deserved it,” he says as an afterthought.

“Shit, I’d hate to see what it’s like for the poor girl who actually gets dumped by you,” I say as I rub my hands over my eyes and yawn.

“Did we wake you?” he questions with concern as Ashley tries again before jiggling the locked door handle.

“What do you think?” I grunt before laying back down and curling into his bed.

He crosses the room and rifles through his closet before pulling out a blanket and tossing it over the top of me. “Do you mind if I chill out for a bit?” he questions. “You know, only until she pisses off.”

“It’s your room,” I say with a shrug.

He nods his head and takes a seat on top of his desk which is when it gets awkward. I mean, what the hell are we supposed to talk about?

“You still owe me an apology, you know?” I tell him.

He scoffs as he looks at me with a sparkle in his dark eyes. “What for?” he questions.

“Where do I start?” I smirk. “First up, for scaring the shit out of me at that race last night and not letting me out of the car. Secondly, for kidnapping me... twice now. And third, how about for the past five years of being an asshat.”

“An asshat?” he questions.

“Yes, an asshat,” I say with a raised, impatient eyebrow.

He watches me for a moment before grinning. “Never going to happen.”

I let out a huff. I knew it was a long shot but it was worth a try. “What time is it?” I question when the silence begins to slowly kill me.

“After four,” he says. “We’ll start kicking people out soon.”

“Ok,” I mumble into his pillow.

A smirk slowly begins to creep across his face as he watches me and I worry that something awful is about to come flying from his lips. “It never used to be this awkward between us,” he says, shocking the absolute hell out of me.

“Yeah,” I agree with a laugh. “That’s because you turned into an asshole.” He lets out a sigh and leans forward onto his knees. “Is it...?” cringe, “did I...?” I let out a sigh, giving up as I’m simply unable to get the question out.

Just like when we were kids, he knows exactly what I’m thinking. “No,” he tells me. “You didn’t do anything. This is all on me.” I look away. I don’t know if that makes it better or worse. “I’ll let you sleep,” he says as he jumps down from the desk.

I nod my head as I silently watch him walk to the door. He unlocks it before turning back to me and watching me as he flicks off the light. “Night, Tora,” he says into the darkness.

“Night,” I whisper back, though, with the sound of the music flowing up through the open door, I don’t know if he hears me.

The door closes behind him and I find myself lying awake, feeling really unsure about what just happened. I mean, it was super awkward, but did we seriously just have a conversation that didn't end with me wanting to tear him to pieces?

I try to get back to sleep after that, but too many thoughts are running through my head. So, I listen. I listen to the sounds of the people lingering on the stairs. The sound of the music thumping through the floors. The people screaming and squealing as they get thrown in the pool.

An hour passes and the noises start to lessen. The music is lowered before it eventually gets turned off. The front door opens and closes at least fifty times before the voices finally fade away.

I reach over to light up the screen of my phone to see it's now five thirty in the morning and groan. All I want to do is sleep.

I lay in bed for another half an hour until the sun is peeking through the window and hitting me right in the face. I get up out of Nate's bed and realize I still have no clothes as I'm not brave enough to go barging into my room with Maxen and Brooke probably butt naked in it.

I put my bikini back on before pulling Nate's shirt over the top and tying it in a knot at the back. I grab my shorts and shuffle them up my legs before sliding my sandals back on. I let out a heavy sigh and head into Nate's bathroom to splash some water over my face.

As I walk out of his room, I see the mess before I even get to the stairs. As I walk down, I find myself gawking at it all. There are red cups littered on every available surface with half of them knocked off and spilled all over the tiles. There's furniture turned over. There are empty alcohol bottles covering the kitchen. There's mud walked right through the house. The outdoor pool area is a mess with three of the sunbeds in the pool.

This is ridiculous. I've never seen the morning after and now that I have, it's something I never want to see again.

And to think all this started when I asked Trish if I could invite a friend over.

With that knowledge firmly in my mind, I start cleaning.

I flick the music on low and grab a big trash bag. I start with the

rooms that didn't get used much and gasp as I find a body fast asleep on the couch in the formal living room. I poke the guy and wait for him. "Hey," I call. "Time to go."

"What?" he groans as he pushes himself up.

"Get your ass out of here, dude," I say a little louder.

"Jesus, woman," he grunts before getting up and actually heading to the door. I smile at my accomplishment as I thought that would have taken a lot longer.

I get on with my cleaning, collecting all the red cups in each room and stacking them to save room in the trash. It surprisingly doesn't take long to put each room back together as once the furniture is straightened and the cups removed, it's pretty much done, except for mopping and wiping all the surfaces down, of course.

By eight o'clock, there are seven massive trash bags waiting by the door for someone to take out to the bin. I mean, if I knew where their bins were, I'd probably take the bags out, but that's something the boys are going to have to do.

I find the mop and go nuts in each room before finding the spray and wipe and wiping everything down. It's only then that I realize I haven't seen Nate anywhere and wonder where the hell he slept.

At ten, I head out the back and straighten everything up while also enjoying the sun that peaks out from behind the clouds. By eleven thirty I'm hosing everything down and standing back with a smile. I'm exhausted already and for once, my stomach is actually grumbling.

I make myself a sandwich, and by midday, I head back upstairs to Nate's room to read a little. I must only be reading for twenty minutes when Jesse screaming from within his bedroom has me flying out of Nate's bed and rushing towards the door.

"Shit. Nate," Jesse yells at the top of his lungs. "Mom and dad will be home in an hour."

"Fuck," I hear cursed from within my room.

I stand at the open doorway and watch in amusement as Jesse comes tearing out of his room with some random girl behind him while Nate rips

the door open of mine. Jesse looks at me and Nate in confusion, probably wondering why we've switched bedrooms before both the boys take off down the hallway and then down the stairs like a herd of elephants.

I take my opportunity to duck into my room and grab my things so I can get out of here for the day. As I go to exit my room, both the boys appear in my doorway with shocked and confused looks covering their handsome faces. I barge my way between them before making my way downstairs.

"Whoa," Nate says, hurrying after me and catching my elbow to bring me to a stop. I spin around and he takes me in, looking up and down my body and grinning as he notices I'm still wearing his shirt. "Where are you going?"

"Home," I tell him as I shrug out of his grip and try to ignore the way my body is screaming to get closer to him.

Nate doesn't respond and Jesse steals my attention. "You cleaned our house," he says in confusion.

"Observant," I mutter with a sarcastic grin.

"Why?" he questions.

"Because I had a feeling you idiots were going to sleep in," I say before turning back around and heading down the stairs.

They hurry down behind me and Nate takes my elbow again. "Wait," he says. "We'll make you lunch."

"Nate," I groan. "I've already eaten. I've hardly slept and all I want to do is go home and sleep in my own bed."

"You've eaten?" he questions in disbelief.

"Yes. I've eaten," I confirm with a roll of my eyes. "I'll see you guys at school."

With that, I walk out the door and leave them behind. I keep myself walking for twenty minutes, wishing I had my car with me. I get all the way home and the second I push through the door, I drag my feet up to my room and collapse down into my bed.

I don't remember falling asleep but a few hours later, my phone buzzing with an incoming text has me groaning into the late afternoon. I

reach over and grab the phone before snuggling back into my bed.

I bring up the message and grin at my idiot best friend.

Brooke – Holy crap, Torz. WHAT A GREAT NIGHT! Can you believe it? It was incredible! I mean, HE was incredible. I tell ya, Torz. It was ALL NIGHT LONG!!!!!!

Tora – STOP!!!! You're making me laugh too hard, it hurts. Believe me, I know it was all night long because I had to sleep in Nate's bed!

Brooke – Oh shit! Sorry. I didn't even think about that.

Tora – I figured.

Brooke – We have so much to talk about tomorrow. I can't wait.

Brooke – Oh, and btw, apparently, Miss Pom-Pom is on the warpath! She's coming after you. I still can't believe I missed you bitch slap her.

Tora – Tell her to bring it!

Chapter 12

After checking in with mom and dad and saying a quick hello to Nanna, I get myself up and ready for Monday morning at school. I can't believe it's only the start of week two. It feels like I've done enough living to last me a lifetime over the past seven days.

I've made out with the quarterback and gotten rid of him, declared war on the cheerleaders, started living with two teenage boys, been the reason for one major heartbreak, rekindled my friendship with Jesse, and managed to have a half decent conversation with Nate Ryder during the middle of a spontaneous pool party.

This is ridiculous. This isn't what my life is, but over the past seven days, it's quickly becoming my new reality.

I drive into the Broken Hill High parking lot and search for a spot that's far away from everybody in the hopes that no one sees just how bad I am at driving this hunk of metal. I mean, so far, I think I'm doing a pretty good job, considering I taught myself from reading up on google, but it's not a smooth drive at all. Every gear change comes with a jump and I've slammed on the brakes more than I care to admit.

As I bring the car to a stop, I instantly find myself looking around for his car, only I never get a chance to actually find it as the warning bell is already ringing. "Shit," I grunt. It must have taken me longer to get my ass here than I had thought.

I hurry up to the school and find Brooke just about to head to class. "Hey," I call out, prompting her to turn around. "Wait up."

She rolls her eyes and makes her way over to my locker before unlocking it for me to help quicken things up. I jam my stuff into it before we dash off to our class together. "What's going on?" she questions as my eyes scan the room. I let out a breath. He's not here, though I shouldn't be surprised, skipping class isn't exactly taboo for him. "You're never late."

"I know," I tell her as I slide in behind my desk. "I drove the Audi, or

at least, I tried to.”

“Shit,” she laughs. “Was it really that bad?”

“Yeah,” I grin. “I had to park in the furthest spot away because I’m too chicken to reverse out with cars beside me.”

“You’re such an idiot,” she laughs before quickly glancing at the people around us and making sure no one is listening in on our conversation. “So,” she says in a whisper. “I swear, Saturday night was the best night of my life.”

“Really?” I ask. “Was he as good as they all say he is?”

“Better,” she says with a flush creeping into her cheeks. “He lived up to his reputation... three times.”

“No way,” I laugh.

She nods her head. “It was so good. I didn’t want to leave, but then last night, he called me and I snuck out to see him.”

“What?” I shriek under my breath as Mr. Miller walks in and start organizing his papers. “Your mom would have killed you if you got caught.”

“I know,” she says. “But more importantly, Maxen came back for seconds. He never goes back for seconds.”

I think it over and realize she’s right so I go to give her a cheesy high five but Mr. Miller is cutting into everyone’s conversation and demanding our attention. “Alright, guys,” he says. “Your weekend is over so if you wouldn’t mind leaving the conversation about who had the best party until your lunch break, that would be great. Now, turn to page sixty-eight in your textbook and we’ll get started.”

With that, I start flicking through the pages when the door of the room is pushed open. My eyes instantly snap up and find Nate walking through the door as though he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“Nathaniel,” Mr. Miller reprimands. “What kind of time do you...?” He lets out a resigned sigh. “Never mind. Just take your seat and turn to page sixty-eight.”

Nate doesn’t acknowledge him as he walks up the row of desks and past me. His eyes lock on mine for the briefest moment and for a second, it’s

as though I was thrown back to last week. His hard eyes scan over me with disinterest before flicking away and making me wonder if he has forgotten everything that's happened over the past few days.

I try to ignore it all but find it impossible with him taking the seat directly behind me. I get on with my work and an hour later am relieved when the class is dismissed.

At lunch, I meet Brooke in the cafeteria and get ourselves something to eat. While we're picking something out, Courtney and Bec come to join us.

We turn around to find our table when I see them all. The group of boys sitting amongst Jesse, though, luckily for me, Nate is nowhere to be seen. Then there are the cheerleaders with one particular nasty glare coming my way from the cheer princess. Next up, Josh's scowl. I mean, the guy has never been turned down in his life so I'm sure when I told him to back off it would have bruised his ego.

"What do you say about sitting out in the sun today?" I suggest to my group of friends.

Brooke looks longingly over toward Maxen, who's grinning back at her. "Alright," she groans as Courtney and Bec shrug their shoulders, not really giving a crap where we sit.

The second our asses hit the ground, Brooke launches into her detailed explanation of her last two nights with Max. She goes from having a cocky attitude to getting a little more reserved and the by the end of the story, she's blushing and acting as though she's desperately in love with the guy.

I groan, seeing that she's already starting to have real feelings for this guy. I mean, he's a player, through and through. He's just as bad as Jesse and Nate and she's going to get her heart crushed.

Towards the end of lunch, I watch as the whole football team and cheer squad comes out of the cafeteria to take advantage of the rest of their break. The football team head down to the field while naturally, the cheerleaders follow, each of them tucked safely under one of the boys' arms.

They kick around a ball while we sit and watch the show.

It's nearly the end of lunch when Elle's best friend, Phoenix, points me out. Elle turns around and looks for me and the second her eyes meet mine, they narrow with some sort of nasty plan. She calls out to Josh who looks up at hearing his name before she points me out.

Together they both smirk and start making their way over here. They meet in the middle and beeline for me.

"Shit," Brooke cringes, saying what we're all thinking. "This isn't going to be good."

"I know," I groan. "It was bound to happen sooner or later," I say, watching in amusement as their arrogant grins turn into innocent smiles the closer they get.

"I don't know," Courtney says. "They look like they just want to talk."

I scoff at her. "No way are they just wanting to talk," I say. "Not after I turned him down and slapped her in front of the whole senior class."

"Good point," Courtney grunts.

Our conversation comes to a stop as Elle and Josh reach us with their fake smiles. "Hey Tora," Josh says first with a strange excitement in his eyes. "What's going on?"

I narrow my eyes on him, not liking that I don't know their game plan. "What do you want, Josh?" I question while I busily ignore Elle.

"I thought we could talk," he tells me as he rubs the back of his head. "I was kind of an ass the other night. I want to make it up to you."

I scoff and turn my attention on Elle, not believing a word Josh says. "And I suppose you want to talk, too?"

"Look," she says, instantly jumping on the defense as I get to my feet. "It's my senior year and I'm not interested in playing games. I have too much riding on my shoulders being the cheer captain and if I want to get into my top choice for college, then I can't afford any distractions. So, I think we need to put this thing to rest. We should go somewhere private and sort out our differences before things get out of hand."

"You'd make a great actress," I tell her as Brooke, Courtney, and Bec

also get to their feet, making it a point that we're not buying their bullshit.

Elle's eyes darken and I watch as her jaw clenches while also trying to maintain her innocent smile. Whatever this plan is, it involves getting me alone, and that's some next level bullshit that I'm not going to fall for.

"Come on, babe," Josh says, reaching out and stroking his hand down my arm. "We only need a minute and then we'll leave you alone."

I pull back away from his touch and am about to tell him to shove his head up his ass when an arm is thrown over my shoulder. I startle at the suddenness of having someone so close beside me and whip my head around to find Jesse. Though, I shouldn't be surprised. It seems that whenever something is going on, Jesse is always close by. "What's up, Josh?" Jesse says, narrowing his eyes on him as though he knows their secret.

"What do you want, Jesse?" Josh grunts as he focuses all his attention on him.

"Not much. I was just about to steal Tora away."

"Tough shit," Josh replies with a heavy scowl, making it clear just how much he doesn't like Jess. "She was coming with us to talk things out."

"Oh," Jesse says, feigning surprise before looking down at me. "Were you busy?"

"Nope," I tell him. "I've got all the time in the world."

"Are you serious, right now?" Elle cuts in with her signature attitude. "We're trying to do something nice for you."

"Right," Jesse says, releasing his arm off my shoulder and stepping forward towards Elle. "I know all about the 'nice' thing you wanted to do for Tora, and let me tell you, it ain't going to happen. Not unless you want word of what you did at Ty's party last month to get out."

Her face drains of all color as her eyes widen in horror. She flicks her eyes to me and then back to Jesse before swallowing her pride. "Come on, Josh," she says, not removing her glare off Jesse. "We should go."

"What?" he grunts. "No way."

"Josh," Elle demands. "Let's go." With that, she turns and walks away.

Josh's eyes narrow on me before he realizes he's completely alone here. He lets out a small huff before turning and following Elle, though I get the feeling that he's not quite finished with me. He wants his revenge and he'll stop at nothing to get it.

Jesse turns back to me with a grin the size of Texas across his face. "You're welcome," he says before nodding and pretending to tip his non-existent hat to me.

"I'm welcome?" I scoff. "I totally had that handled. I didn't need your big head getting involved."

"Bullshit," he says. "You would have caved out of curiosity."

My mouth drops and I go to call him out when Brooke cuts me off. "Speaking of curiosity," she says. "What the hell happened at Tyson's party?"

Jesse's eyes cut across to Brooke before he winks and draws his fingers across his lips, pretending to zip them. She rolls her eyes but he doesn't see as he turns his attention back on me. "Come on," he tells me before walking off.

"What? I'm not going anywhere with you," I call behind him.

He stops and looks back at me. "Hurry up," he demands.

I let out a sigh before looking back at the girls. "I'll be back in a bit."

"No, she won't," he tells them.

I shake my head and wave goodbye before following Jesse up towards the school. "Would you wait up?" I say.

We walk into the hallway with the senior lockers and Jesse stops right beside mine. "You should probably get your things. You won't be coming back today."

"Huh?" I grunt as I stare at him blankly. "Where the hell are we going?"

"No fucking clue," he says before nodding towards my locker. "Make it quick."

I cross my arms over my chest and give him an impatient look as I lean against the locker. "I'm not ditching school."

“Why do you have to be so difficult all the time?” he groans before reaching for the lock and putting the combination straight in. He opens it as I gawk at him and takes my bag straight out. “Come on,” he says before stalking off.

“Hey,” I call after him before I realize he would more than happily take off with my things. I hurry to catch up with him and yank my bag out of his hands. “What do you think you’re doing? And how do you know the combination for my locker?”

“First up, I’m trying to get you to hurry up. I thought that much was clear, and the combination is the same as your gate at home. 1005. You really need to find something a little more original.”

I narrow my eyes on him and give in. “Where are we going?” I ask as he pushes out the front doors of the school and walks down towards the parking lot.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he tells me. “You are.”

“Huh?” I grunt just as Nate’s Camaro pulls into the lot. He drives around and a moment later he comes to a stop right before us.

Jesse reaches for the door handle and pulls it open. “Get in,” he tells me. I clench my jaw and look over my shoulder. I wonder how far I’ll make it before they’ll catch me? “Don’t even think about it,” Jesse says. “I’ll catch you in no time, and trust me, I’ll enjoy throwing you over my shoulder.”

I groan and narrow my eyes on Jesse. “You’re an ass.”

“And you’re a princess,” he tells me. “Now, get in.”

With a huff, I do as I’m told and slide into the passenger’s seat of Nate’s car. Jesse shuts the door a second later and before I know it, Nate is peeling out of the school parking lot. “Will you at least tell me where we’re going?”

Naturally, he doesn’t respond, though I’m not surprised. He reaches into the back of his car and a second later, he tosses something onto my lap before focusing back on the road. “Eat,” he says.

I look down into my lap to find a sandwich looking back up at me. With a groan, I start nibbling.

Nate looks across to make sure I'm eating and seems to relax a bit when he watches me pull off a piece of bread and pop it into my mouth. "You've got to tell Jesse to back off," I tell him.

His eyebrows pull down before he turns back to me. "Why?" he grunts.

"He tried to swoop in and save me from Elle and Josh when I had it handled. You know, despite what you and Jesse think, I can take care of myself."

Nate shakes his head and pushes his car a little faster. "Do you have any idea what they were planning on doing to you?"

"No," I say. "But it wasn't going to happen anyway. I wasn't going with them."

"Whether or not you went with them is beside the point. They would have gone through with their plan anyway. They would have just waited you out. Done it at a party or tried to corner you at home. Trust me, you don't know how these people work."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I question. "What was their plan?"

He lets out a sigh as his hand tightens on the steering wheel, turning his knuckles white. "They were going to strip you down and have Josh all over you. Elle was going to record the whole thing and post it all over the internet, calling you a whore. I overheard them discussing it this morning."

My eyes widen as my jaw drops. "What kind of sick people do shit like that?" I question as my heart begins racing.

"Quarterbacks and cheerleaders," he grunts.

I sit back in the chair and look out the window feeling sick. I mean, was that seriously their plan? To get me naked and humiliate me in front of the whole school, branding me a slut? "I don't get it," I say. "All of this just because I didn't want to screw him? And I mean, Elle was the one who threw her drink all over me in the first place."

"I know," he says. "But you challenged her. You went against her when she's trying to assert her dominance as cheer captain. Josh probably would have left you alone. He doesn't have the brains to come up with it, but now the idea is in his head and he wants it. This screams Elle. She would

have put Josh up to it.”

I silently nod my head, wondering how the hell I’m supposed to deal with this.

Nate pulls into an old abandoned parking lot and I turn towards him. “What are we doing here?” I question. This lot belonged to an old mall that was closed down a few months ago and is due to be demolished and rebuilt into a high-rise apartment building. There’s literally no reason that could bring us here.

Nate keeps his mouth shut and continues driving. He pulls around a corner which is when I see it. “Is that my car?” I question as we get closer.

“Yep,” he grunts. “I’m sick of watching you destroy it.” He pulls up beside it and slides his hand into his pocket before handing me my car keys. “I’m teaching you how to drive.”

Chapter 13

I stare at Nate in shock before my eyes flick down to the keys in my hand. How the hell did he get my car keys? I don't have to think about it long before I remember the way Jesse had dived into my locker with such ease that anyone would think it was his.

The second I get back to school, I'm changing the code. I may as well work out how to change the code on my front gate at home too. That might help me to avoid getting kidnapped by Nate in the near future, though, I'm sure he'll find a way.

Nate opens his car door, ignoring my shock and looks back at me. "Are you coming?" he grunts with impatience before getting out and walking over to my car.

I narrow my eyes on his back before letting out a huff. I don't think I have a choice in the matter. I get myself out of his car and walk around to mine while hitting the unlock button on the keys.

Nate gets in my passenger's side while I get myself comfortable in the driver's seat. The second I close the door behind me, the nerves settle in. I don't like this one bit. It's one thing for me to drive alone and allow myself to work it out, and it's another to have to do it in front of Nate Ryder.

"You good?" he asks as he looks across at me.

I nod my head as everything I've taught myself about driving this thing has completely turned to mush with Nate sitting beside me.

"Start the car," he tells me. "Put your foot on the break and the other on the clutch." I let out a breath as I do what I'm told and start the engine. "Release the hand brake."

I do that and swallow back the fear of embarrassing myself. "Alright," he says, using a tone that, for once, isn't making me want to smack him. "The car's already in first gear, so after you come off the break, you have to give it a little gas while also coming off the clutch."

He uses his hands to demonstrate how I should slowly press the gas

while coming off the clutch. I turn back to face what I'm doing and try my best to tune him out. I find my hands clenching down around the steering wheel and decide to go for it. I mean, it's either now or never.

I come off the break and scramble around while trying to remember what the hell he just told me. The car lurches forward and promptly dies in the ass. "Shit," I groan while an amused smirk comes over Nates face.

"That was too fast," he tells me. "You need to find the sweet spot."

"The sweet spot?" I grunt.

"I'll show you," he says. "Start it up again."

With a groan, I start up the engine, making sure to put my feet on the clutch and brake. "Come off the break," he tells me. I look at him with wide eyes. "Relax," he says. "We're on a flat. The car isn't going anywhere."

"Ok," I say slowly before doing as he asks.

"Alright, now come off the clutch just a bit," he says.

I do as I'm told and release the clutch just a little when I feel the car respond. It almost feels as though it's talking to me, telling me it's ready to go. I come up a little higher and the car screams at me to lower the clutch again. I do just that and I instantly get it. "That's the sweet spot."

"Mhmm," Nate says. "Once you find that, then you can go."

An hour later, I drive up and down the length of the parking lot like a pro. Before I got in this thing, I was terrified of it, but now, I feel giddy with excitement. I change gears and push my little R8 faster. "Shit," I laugh. "I bet I could whip your ass at the races."

Nate scoffs and I see him shaking his head out the corner of my eye. "No chance in hell," he says. I hear a smile in his voice that pulls deep within me and has butterflies circling my tummy. I find I really like it, though. I mean, it definitely beats him scolding me and being a prick.

I pull up beside his Camaro and look over at him. "Thanks," I say with a smile.

"Trust me," he says with his signature attitude. "I didn't do it for you. I couldn't stand seeing you treat this thing like shit."

"Uh huh," I grunt as I watch him climb out of my R8. He stops and

turns back around. “Are you coming back to my place tonight?”

“I think I might,” I tell him. “Besides, I need to kick Jesse’s ass for breaking into my locker.”

At that, Nate nods and pulls himself the rest of the way out. A moment before he closes the door, he bends down to look at me. His eyes sparkle as he smirks at me with mischief written all over his face, a look I’m finding looks really good on him. “Who do you think gave him the combination?” he says, closing the door and dropping into his Camaro.

I should have known. I can’t help but grin to myself as I take off like a bat out of hell. I peel out of the old parking lot and I find myself looking up into my rearview mirror and watching as Nate follows right behind me.

He usually drives a whole lot faster but he doesn’t move out from behind me, not until I pull up at a red light. He brings his car to a stop right beside me and I grin across at him before revving my engine, a taunt that says I’m more than prepared to whoop his ass.

A smile cuts across his face before he laughs to himself while making my heart do flips inside my chest.

A second later, the light turns green and Nate takes off, calling my bluff. His wheels squeal against the road and I watch in shock as he takes off like he’s in one of the ‘*Fast and Furious*’ movies, and I have to say, I’m mighty impressed and maybe just a little turned on.

Holy crap. I need to learn how to do that.

I take off at the green light like a regular human and find myself approaching the school. There’s still another hour until school lets out for the day. I’ve never ditched class before and I hate the thought of getting in trouble, yet, for some reason, I just keep driving, wanting nothing more than to go back to Nate’s place as right now, I’m reminded of the old Nate, not the asshole he later became.

Besides, I can either chill out at Nate’s place or try to avoid having Josh and Elle put their atrocious plan into place.

I keep myself driving and pull into their long ass driveway, pleased that Nate left the gate open. I find Nate’s car pulled up by the front door and I bring my Audi to a stop beside it.

I reach across for my handbag when I realize I left it in Nate's car earlier. I get out of my car and look through the window of the Camaro, only to find it's not there. My eyebrows furrow. I couldn't have left it at school.

With a shrug, I walk up the stairs and into their home to find my handbag sitting on the hallway table. My heart skips realizing that he brought it in for me and I feel... giddy.

I grab it and walk deeper into the house. I don't see him anywhere but I expect that he's in his room. so, I head for the den.

I flick on a movie and pull my phone out of my bag. I hit the screen to find a few texts from Brooke.

Brooke – WTF! Where did you go?

Brooke – HELLO????? Tora! Are you alive? Did Jesse take you away to steal your virtue and make lots of sexy Ryder babies?

Brooke – Holy crap, Batman! You just got in Nate's car. You're ditching! I never thought I'd see the day. I'm so proud of you, though I'm kind of jealous. You better spill the beans, I want all the details. Where is Mr. Broody taking you?

Brooke – I hate you! You suck at this!

I laugh as I read through her texts and decide I should probably let her know I'm still alive and that the broody asshole didn't try to humiliate me in some twisted way like he usually does.

Tora – Still alive!

Brooke – Ummm..... I think you owe me a better explanation than that.

I grin down at my phone before hashing out a reply.

Tora – The devil wanted to teach me how to drive.

Brooke – Bullshit. Are you lying right now?

Tora – No, seriously. He took me to the old mall and taught me how to drive a stick.

Brooke – Ok, now I know you're lying. I'll call after class.

Tora – Ok. Love you xx

I throw my phone down on the couch beside me and put my feet up as I allow myself to get lost in the movie. This feels good. If this is what ditching is always like, then sign me up for some more. I could get used to this.

Twenty minutes later, my eyes are wide as I focus every ounce of my being on the screen as the girl in the movie walks towards the closet door which has something waiting for her on the other side. My heart races, terrified of what's going to happen. "no, no, no," I chant, shaking my head. "Don't open the door." Please, please, please don't open the door.

The screen darkens and my breath catches. The girl reaches for handle and yanks it open.

"RAAAA," Nate roars from right behind me, grabbing my shoulders and making me jump right out of my skin.

"What the hell?" I screech as I fly to my feet on top of the couch and spin around to face Nate who's doubled over in uncontrollable laughter. "That wasn't funny."

"Yeah," he laughs. "It really was."

I prop my hands on my hips and glare at him as I try to calm my racing heart. "I'm going to get you back for that," I declare.

"Oh, yeah?" he taunts as he turns to face me straight on as a smirk crosses his smug face. "And how the hell do you plan on doing that?"

I don't even think about it. I just move.

I launch myself over the top of the couch and come flying into his hard body. His eyes widen with shock before he thankfully catches me. My legs wrap around him and try to tackle him to the ground as he attempts to push me off.

Laughter comes ripping out of both of us and for a minute, I forget that this is Nate Ryder, leader of the dickheads and douchebags. "You're going to regret this," he teases as he grabs my waist and pushes me away, but I latch onto his shoulders, refusing to let go.

My legs tighten and I pull myself back in before climbing up his body and inconveniencing him as much as I possibly can. "No, you're going to regret this."

Nate's hand comes down over the top on my ribs before the smug asshole laughs a little too hard. "Tell me, babe," he says. "Are you still ticklish here?"

"Shit," I grunt before trying to scramble off him. Only now, he's the one not letting go. How the hell does he remember that I'm ticklish on my ribs?

I get my arms free of him and with the couch right behind me, all I have to do is push back off him which I try to do a second later. My top half goes back over the couch but with my legs still tightly wrapped around him, he tumbles forward with me. "Fuck," he grunts as we both fall to the massive couch.

I gasp as he comes down on top of me, terrified I'm about to be squished, but he reaches down beside my face and breaks his fall before he does any damage.

My heart races as a breath of relief escapes us both. Within a blink of an eye, the laughter is gone and I realize that I currently have Nate laying on top of me with my legs wrapped around his waist.

Crap.

He freezes, just as I do. Both of us unsure of what's happening right now. He should be pulling away and trying to get as far away from me as possible, or at least, I should be doing that, yet neither one of us is moving.

He looks down at me with those eyes that I loved as a child and suddenly, his hand is at my face, pushing my hair off my face. He looks confused but still, he doesn't move.

My hand comes up and I place it against his chest. I feel his heart beat beneath my fingers and there's no mistaking it, it's racing just as fast as mine is.

It hits me with a startling realization. I'm crushing on Nate Ryder, and right here, with him laying on top of me, close enough to kiss, I like the idea of it.

His hand on my face curls around the back of my neck as he lowers his face to mine. I close my eyes and then he's there. His lips press against mine softly and it feels incredible. As my body reacts to his kiss, he begins to

deepen it and move a little faster.

My hand slides up his chest and around the back of his neck before I pull him down even closer. I can't believe how good this is. None of the guys I've kissed have ever made me feel quite so... alive.

Every hair on my skin stands at attention and every nerve in my body is on fire. It's incredible. For him to stop would be criminal.

His hand travels down my body and I can't get enough. I've never felt like this before. I mean, sure, I've had guys feel me up, but I've never wanted more the way I do right now.

His lips leave mine and I want to cry out until they come down on my neck and I realize I'm a goner. Nate Ryder could ask just about anything from me right now and I'm as sure as hell that I'll do it.

This is... wow. It's pure intoxication.

My hand squeezes into the muscle of his back as his lips glide over the sensitive skin of my neck. Holy... Wowza.

His hand comes back up and he cups my boob as he presses his hips into me, showing me that he's just as turned on as I am.

The sound of the front door slamming has us jumping apart. "Yo," Jesse calls from the front door. "Where are you fuckers?"

"Shit," Nate grunts as he reluctantly pulls himself off me. I release my legs from around him and let him go. His eyes never leave mine once, not until he pushes himself back into the couch and calls out to Jess. "We're in the den."

I scramble up into a sitting position at the other end of the couch and prop my feet up on the coffee table with my heart still racing inside my chest.

Jesse comes tearing into the den with Tyson and Parker and make themselves comfortable. Jesse falls down beside Nate and puts his feet up on my lap. I consider pushing them right off but realize just how comfortable I am. I feel as though I've been accepted right into this strange little group and I find, I really like it. I almost feel protected by these guys. A week ago, sitting here with this group of boys would have terrified me, but right now, I feel like I belong.

My body is still coming down from the high that Nate put me in and I find myself looking across at him. His eyes meet mine over the top of Jesse's head before he winks, making my cheeks flush. He grins at my reaction and I hate myself for being so obvious.

I look away quicker than humanly possible and try to focus on the movie, but let's face it, there's no focusing going on here.

My phone chimes and I have to search around for it but eventually, find it on the floor. I find a text from Brooke and am thankful for the distraction.

Brooke – I'm going home with Max. I'll call you later, k.

Tora – Alright. Be safe xx

I tuck my phone away when Jesse nudges me with his foot. I look over to find him smirking at me. "So," he says. "You know how to drive now, princess."

I roll my eyes but can't help smirking right back at him. "A lot better than you can, douchebag."

He laughs and shakes his head at me before turning his attention towards the screen. "Oh, shit," he says with wide eyes as he takes in the horror film. "Everyone knows you don't look under the bed."

Chapter 14

Tyson and Parker eventually leave and when they go, a strange tension starts to build, but I don't know where it's coming from. Maybe Jesse is pissed, or maybe it's Nate. Hell, maybe it's coming from me.

All I know is that I can't stop thinking about what happens next. When we finally get off this couch and the movie ends. Do I pretend like nothing happened? Do I pretend that I didn't just get kissed by the Broken Hill bad boy? Or is he going to pounce on me the second Jesse leaves?

I'm nervous as hell and I hate it.

I mean, what the hell is going on here? Nate has been an ass to me for nearly five years and now all of a sudden, I have some ridiculous crush on the guy and am making out with him on his couch? *Get a grip, Tora.*

"What's your problem?" Jesse asks.

I look across and realize his question is aimed at me. My eyebrows pull down in confusion as I pull my legs up under me. "Huh?" I grunt. "What are you talking about?"

"You look like you're thinking really hard," he tells me.

My eyes flick up to Nate's before looking back at Jesse. "It's nothing," I say getting up from the couch. "I've got some school work to do."

I walk out of the den and pass Trish in the kitchen who stops me with a smile. "Oh, hey, Tora," she says. "I didn't realize you were here."

"Yeah, sorry," I say. "I've been holed up with the boys all afternoon."

"Were you planning on staying tonight?" she asks as she chops up some carrots.

"Yeah, it gets a little lonely at home," I explain.

She nods her head and gives me a sympathetic smile. "I bet," she says. "Dinner will be ready in an hour."

“Just enough time to get through my homework,” I tell her.

She smiles and I make my exit before holing up in my room, avoiding the boys downstairs. Though, I can only avoid them for so long before Trish is calling me down to eat. I let out a sigh. I’d be more than happy to stay here for the rest of the night, but apparently, normal people like to eat dinner.

I walk down and through the kitchen to see the table only set for three. I look up at Trish in confusion and find her sliding her handbag over her shoulder. She picks up on my blank look straight away and a smile takes over her face. “It’s Monday night, date night,” she informs me.

“Oh,” I smile, pleasantly surprised. My parents haven’t gone out on a date since... well, I can’t actually remember. “Have a good time.”

“Thanks, darling,” she says, giving my shoulder a squeeze before calling out for Cade to tell him to hurry up so they don’t miss their reservation.

Trish goes to walk out of the dining room as the boys are walking in. She stops to give them each a kiss on the cheek before reminding them to be good and do their homework. They roll their eyes and before I know it, she’s gone and it’s just the three of us sitting down for dinner.

I sit at the table, hating that I feel so awkward when clearly, the boys are as relaxed as can be. Nate digs straight in and helps himself to his dinner and I’m pleased to find him not insisting on dishing up my dinner for me.

I fill up my glass while I wait for Jesse to dish up his own dinner before he passes the serving spoon to me. I head straight for the vegetables and find the smallest piece of meat on the tray, knowing this isn’t going to go well.

I feel Nate’s glare on me but I ignore it as I make myself comfortable on the chair. The boys wolf down their dinner with a speed that I’m sure will be giving them a stomach ache while I pick and pull my dinner apart, mainly only eating a handful of vegetables.

Nate hasn’t taken his eyes off me the whole time, and I swear, it just makes it worse. I can’t help but glance up at him only to find him scowling at me. I feel completely ashamed of myself. Embarrassed even.

I look back down at my plate, hating that I have this problem. I wish I could just swallow my food and not have an issue, but I can't. No matter how many times I try, I just can't.

My eyes pool with unshed tears but I don't dare let them fall.

I stab a piece of broccoli onto my fork and lift it to my mouth. I bite off the top of it and start chewing. If I was at home right now, I'd have probably have only eaten half as much as I already have, but here, with an audience, I'm forced to actually try, and from the look on both Nate and Jesse's faces, I'm clearly not trying hard enough.

I get halfway through my broccoli when Nate flies out of his chair, grabs my plate, and launches it across the room. The plate crashes into the wall and the expensive china shatters into a thousand pieces. "Fuck, Tora," he demands.

My eyes widen in shock as a gasp flies out of my mouth. My eyes meet Nate's and he stares back at me with nothing but pure rage on his handsome face while his chest rises and falls with heavy breaths.

My heart's racing for a whole new reason and it's one I don't like. I swallow back fear as the look in his eyes is downright terrifying.

Nate slams his fist down onto the table and before I know it, I'm pushing back out of my chair and running. I'm not ready to face this and I know if I stay at this table a second later, that's exactly what he's going to make me do.

So, I run.

I dash out of the dining room and out through the kitchen before heading for the stairs. I take two at a time and am just about to push through my bedroom door when his arms curls around my waist and he pulls me back before slamming me up against the wall.

We stare at each other, both taking deep, heavy breaths. The rage is still bubbling up in his eyes but behind that is nothing but concern. "What the fuck is your problem?" he demands from right above me. "Do you think your fat?"

I shrink back from him. "No," I say in a quiet voice.

"Then what is it, Tora?" he yells. "You can't keep doing this to

yourself. Do you have any idea how unhealthy this is?"

"I..." I look away as the tears pooled in my eyes finally spill over.

"Spit it out."

I swallow back as my watery eyes look up into his. My heart breaks with having to talk about it. "I... I just." I let out a sigh. "I just don't feel it," I say, feeling like a stranger in my own skin.

"Feel what?" he demands.

I look away, once again ashamed of myself. "Beautiful," I whisper.

"Fuck," he says, pushing himself off the wall and walking up the hallway. He stops a few steps up and presses both hands into the wall before hanging his head. I keep my eyes trained on him, certain that if I was to move, he'd come right back after me.

"Fuck," he says again, startling me as he rears back and punches a hole through the wall.

I gasp and watch with wide eyes as he storms back towards me. He slides a warm arm around my waist before pulling me hard against his body. "You're so fucking beautiful, it hurts," he tells me with his head tilted down towards mine. "You always have been, Tora. Don't you ever tell yourself that you're not."

Another tear falls from my eye as he presses a kiss to my forehead. A moment later, he's gone.

I stand in the hallway staring at his closed door feeling lost. I want to go in there and demand answers for what happened this afternoon and what he just said. It doesn't make sense for him to be kissing me and saying those things, especially after treating me so bad for the past five years.

What the hell is happening here?

I sink to the floor, not even having the energy to take the few steps to my room. My head falls into my hands as the tears silently flow. I cry not from the way he yelled and scared me but from the way he looked at me and challenged my beliefs. I mean, he looked at me and held me as though he truly believed it. Especially when he held me out on the couch this afternoon and pushed my hair off my face before he kissed me. I've never felt wanted

like that.

It wasn't the same as when I was with Josh and I could tell he just wanted me to get naked. This was different, this was as though he thought I was precious. He said I was so beautiful it hurt.

He's making me feel things that I shouldn't be feeling. He's making me want to be better as the thought of having him looking at me with that same disappointment is almost enough to paralyze me.

I take a breath and wipe the tears off my face.

I need to be better cause I'll be damned if I had either one of the Ryder brothers looking at me with pity again. I've kicked this diseases ass once before. I can do it again.

I will be healthy.

I will eat proper meals.

I will not throw up my food.

I will tell myself that I'm beautiful even though I don't believe it.

I will be the best version of myself, no matter how hard that is to achieve.

I push myself up to my feet and with a fierce determination, I walk back down the stairs. When I get into the kitchen I gawk at the sight I thought I'd never see. Jesse Ryder cleaning up after himself. He stands at the sink rinsing off the dishes and grunting to himself about his brother being a dickhead.

I grab a dustpan and broom and silently go in to help him. He gives me a grateful smile as I clean up the shattered pieces of china all over the floor. "You good?" Jesse questions as he places the leftover dinner in the fridge.

I don't meet his eyes as I nod, terrified that if I do, it will bring on the waterworks all over again. So instead, I concentrate on helping him clean.

Ten minutes later, the dishwasher is running and I make my way upstairs with a plate of food in my hand. As I get to my door, Nate's opens and he steps out into the hallway. His eyes instantly find mine before they lower to the plate in my hands.

I don't want to see what emotion flickers over his face next, so I push into my room and gently close the door behind me.

I sit on my bed cross-legged and stare down at the plate. "I'm going to make you my bitch," I tell it. I cut my knife through a piece of chicken and put it in my mouth.

Chew.

Swallow.

Repeat.

It takes me nearly an hour to finish off the plate and by the end, I sit with tears streaming down my face and the desperate need to throw it all up. But I won't. Not this time.

My stomach starts to ache but I manage to make my way downstairs to clean up my plate. When I get back, I stand under the hot stream of my shower before tucking myself into bed with my Kindle.

I read for about an hour before my stomach starts to settle which is when I reach over and flick off the lamp on my bedside table.

I'm just about asleep when the door of my room slowly pushes open. I look up to find Nate hovering in my doorway, leaning against the frame as he silently watches me. "Are you ok?" he murmurs into the dark room.

I nod my head against the pillow. "Yeah," I whisper.

"Did you eat it?"

I nod my head again. "I did."

Instant relief comes over him as he continues to hover in the doorway. I see indecision in his eyes but I don't know why it's there, until a moment later when he steps into my room and closes the door behind him before flicking the lock.

I watch him as he walks down around my bed, pulls off his shirt, and climbs in the bed beside me. He reaches out and wraps his arm around my waist before pulling me back against him. "What are you doing?" I question, feeling a little unsure.

"Just... sleeping," he says.

I take in the feel of his arm around my body and realize that I wouldn't have it any other way. "Ok."

I can't help but like it. The way his strong arm perfectly fits around me. The way his body presses up against mine. The way his fingers trace little circles over my shoulder before trailing them down my arm and lacing them through my own.

It's intoxicating and it makes me feel... beautiful. Wanted.

I don't know where the hell I find the balls, but I find myself turning in his arms so I can look up into those dark eyes. My shirt moves up my body with the movement and his hand finds the bare skin of my waist. He rubs his thumb back and forward, sending shivers all over my skin. It's electrifying and has me tilting my chin up to meet his lips.

Nate kisses me again and it's just as good as it was on the couch, in fact, in the darkness with the door locked, knowing the chances of getting interrupted are slim, it's even better.

He rolls us so he hovers above me and my legs open and wrap around his waist, pulling him in tighter. I feel his arousal pressing into me and realize that I'm all in. I don't know what's happening between me and him, but this is too good to stop.

Maybe I mean something to him or maybe I don't. Maybe this has all just been some sick twisted ploy to get me in bed. Maybe he's about to pull away and humiliate me. Maybe I'll be just another notch on his belt. But then maybe, he means what he told me in the hallway. Maybe he truly believes I'm so beautiful it hurts.

Just that slight inkling of hope, keeps me going. It's too good to be worrying about the chances of this being a game. If it is, I'll deal with that later, but on the slight chance that this is something real, I need to see where it goes.

Nate's hand squeezes onto my waist before he slides it up my body, leaving a burning trail that has me desperate for more. Who would have known that just a touch by Nate Ryder could make me feel so intoxicated?

He takes the hem of my shirt in between his capable fingers and slides it up my body. It's dark in here, but there's light streaming in through

the bedroom window, so I know without a doubt that he can still see my body.

Usually, I'd be nervous or feeling insecure, but not here. Not with him. The way his eyes flame with desire is enough to make me feel like the only woman in the world, especially as my shirt raises all the way over my head and he looks down at my body.

His hand slides up my waist and skims over my chest. I had expected him to dive in and grab them like most teenage guys would, but he doesn't. He treats me like a masterpiece worth admiring and that makes it so much better.

He continues to kiss me while my hands roam over his muscled body. I slide my hands down his back and before I know it, my fingers are slipping into the waistband of his pants. I push at them, wanting to feel more when he pulls back and looks down at me. "Are you sure?" he questions. "Once I start, I'm not going to be able to stop. Not with you."

I think about it for all of two seconds and I know without a doubt what my answer is going to be. Not going any further would be a crime. I pull him back down to me and his lips hover just above mine. "I'm sure," I tell him.

With that, he presses his lips back to mine and allows me to slide his pants down his hips before he does the same with mine. I feel him on me, and I mean all of him. I was wrong the other day. There's so much more than four inches.

His hand comes down my body and he expertly pushes into me with his fingers as mine wrap around him. He works me and my body screams out for more. He reads me like a map and gives me exactly what I need.

Nate pushes up off me and reaches down to his discarded pants to pull a condom out of his pocket, while also giving me the best possible view of his body. It's no wonder girls everywhere are drooling and dying to experience this with him.

He keeps one hand on me as he tears the condom open with his teeth before sliding it on. I swallow as I watch the show. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. The moment I finally give up my V-card. And to be

honest, I'm happy it's happening like this. It isn't rushed, it isn't with some drunk asshole. It's with someone who knows what he's doing and is treating me right.

Nate comes back down to me and he lines himself up. His eyes meet mine and a million messages pass between us. I know I should probably tell him that I've never done this before, but I can't. The words simply just don't want to come out.

Nate makes his move and pushes up into me. I suck in a breath with the sudden sharp pain but thankfully, he's going slow. His lips press down to mine and I allow my body to relax as it gets used to the foreign intrusion.

And then he starts to move and makes me feel things I'd never in a million years dream possible. He touches me in ways that my body has never experienced before and has me digging my nails into his back, desperate for more until he pushes me right over the edge, making my world explode with an unbelievable amount of pleasure.

At the end, he falls into the bed beside me and kisses me again.

I never knew it would be like that. I mean, sure, Brooke talks about how incredible it is all the time, but sometimes I get the feeling she's just saying that and exaggerating because you're supposed to think it's this incredible, earth-shattering experience. I had thought she was always talking it up just because she wanted me to jump in the sack with someone and experience it firsthand.

But now that I have, I see how wrong I was because what just happened here, the way he made my body come alive, the way I responded to his touch and he set me on fire, that was a feeling I'd never forget. It was incredible and has me desperate to do it over and over again.

Nate pulls me in hard to his body and his hand runs up and down my side. The continuous motion has my eyes closing, and with a smile on my face and a sore body, he sends me into a blissful, needed sleep.

Chapter 15

I wake in the morning and stretch my arms out as hundreds of memories come crashing through my mind. A wide smile spreads over my face and I roll over to find him, more than ready to do it all over again.

My whole world comes crashing down. He's not here. I reach my hand out over his side of the bed to find it cold and realize that he left a long time ago. Probably the second I fell asleep.

All sorts of emotions crash through me. Hurt. Betrayal. Disgust.

What have I done? I gave it up to the one guy who wasn't going to stick around. How could I have been so stupid? I was lost in the moment and thought it actually meant something, after all, he called me beautiful and now, I feel anything but. I feel used. Dirty.

My eyes well with tears and I push myself up out of bed, desperate to shower and get the feel of him off my skin.

I stand under the scalding water until the tears have run their course. I was a fool to think Nate Ryder actually had a heart. Joke's on me. He got exactly what he wanted. Hell, I'm sure I could probably go and move back home now, I'll probably even be left alone.

And to think I was actually starting to like it here.

Once the initial shock wears off and my skin starts to become pruned from the water, I step out of the shower and pull a towel tight around me. I look into the mirror and don't miss the little love bites along my neck. More evidence of him on my skin. Never again will he get the best of me like that.

I don't think I've ever sunk so low. I wanted my first time to mean something and I thought it did, but now, it's just another bad memory involving him.

With a fierce determination to never allow Nate Ryder to dictate my life again, I step out into the bedroom and walk over to the door, I flick the lock, refusing to let either of those brothers come tearing in here, trying to boss me around like they so happily do.

I get myself dressed and ready for the day. I grab the bed sheets and rip them off the bed before throwing them in a pile in the corner of the room.

How could I have gone from feeling so impossibly alive last night to feeling absolutely nothing this morning?

With a sigh, I pack all my clothes back in my bag and check the time. It's still early so I can slip out of here without anybody knowing. With my bags in my hands, I make my way downstairs and without a backward glance, I slip out the front door. I unlock my car and throw my bags on the passenger side before starting the engine and peeling out of the Ryder driveway.

Hopefully, I'll never have to come back here again.

It's still early when I get home so I focus on making a difference.

From now on, I'm not some pathetic girl. I'm independent. I don't need Nate shoving food down my throat. I don't need Jesse coming and checking up on me. I don't need Nate constantly trying to save me. From now on, I'm done with him. Jesse though, he's different. He's managed to worm his way back in, and so far, he hasn't done anything to tear me apart.

With the extra time before I head off to school, I jump online and set myself up an account with the grocery store. I put a whole heap of items in my shopping cart and work out a delivery time for this afternoon.

Next up. I need to work out how to change the code for the damn gate.

That takes me nearly an hour and before I know it, I'm running back out the door with my handbag tucked under my arm, desperate to get my ass to school before the warning bell.

I make it with all of two minutes to spare. I pull into a spot that's not so far away this time and don't bother looking around to see if he's here yet. I don't want to know.

"Hey," Brooke laughs as she appears on the other side of my Audi. "You picked a better spot this morning."

"Yeah, apparently, I don't suck at driving as much now," I say, trying my hardest to appear my usual happy self. "What's going on? How was your night?"

A big grin comes over her face as she walks up to the school with me. “It was so good,” she says. “I was with Maxen for most of the afternoon until my mom demanded I come home.”

I roll my eyes. “Let me guess,” I say with a bit of a snap. “He screwed you up against the wall? Or maybe on the hood of his car?”

Her eyebrows pull down as she looks at me. “What’s up with you?” she questions. “You’re a bitch this morning.”

I let out a sigh. “I know,” I say. “I’m sorry. I’m just having a bad morning.”

“Why?” she asks. “What did the boof head brothers do now?”

“Nothing,” I say with a grunt as I choose not to tell her what had happened between us. “It’s just Nate up to his usual games.”

“Oh,” she says before putting her arm around my shoulder and giving me a tight squeeze. “Chin up. He’s probably done worse.”

If only she knew. “Yeah,” I grumble.

We get to our lockers and Brooke ducks across the hallway to throw her things in hers when Maxen grabs her around the waist and spins her around. He pushes her up against the locker and kisses her while she giggles and gives him everything she’s got.

I roll my eyes at the scene, hating that it reminds me of last night, so instead, I focus all my attention on jamming my things into my locker.

A hard body falls into the locker beside me and I look across to see Jesse grinning at me like an idiot. “What’s up?” he says.

I give him a hard glare, wondering if his grin is there because he was in on Nate’s little game as well. “If you’re here to be a jerk, then I don’t want to hear it,” I warn him.

He holds his hands up feigning innocence. “What did I do?” he questions. “I was just coming to see what’s going on. You weren’t at home this morning.”

I study him a little closer and realize that he doesn’t know, so I leave it that way. “It’s nothing,” I tell him. “I just needed my own space.”

The roles reverse and this time it’s him studying me. He leans in a

little closer and glances around at the people in the hallway. “Is this about what happened at dinner last night?” he murmurs.

I press my lips together, unsure how to answer. I feel my eyes stinging with the need to shed a few more tears when the warning bell rings, saving me from another round of embarrassment. “I got to go,” I rush out before slipping out around him and taking off.

“Hey,” he calls after me.

I ignore him and keep my feet moving. I’d rather be in my first class with Josh and Elle than deal with what’s going on with Nate.

I sit in class with Courtney, dodging glances from Josh, while Elle sits with the other cheerleaders, whispering and laughing while ignoring the substitute teacher. Though I don’t miss the way she keeps looking over here, so whatever secret it is that Jesse threatened to expose must have done the trick. For Elle to so quickly back down, means that her secret is enough to destroy her. Though, that doesn’t stop the curiosity coursing through me.

I get on with my school work, trying my hardest to keep my mind off Nate. Mainly the way he touched me and made me feel wanted. I feel that’s something I’ll never find again, not the way it was with him.

By lunch, I collapse down into the cafeteria bench beside Brooke. By now, every one of my friends have had their head bitten off by me at some point today and I hate that I’m being such a cow, but I can’t help it. My heart is hurting and if they want to continue laughing and discussing petty things, then I’m bound to snap.

“You still in a sucky mood?” Brooke questions besides me, making the other girls halt their conversation as they seek out my answer.

I prop my elbow on the table and lean my head into it before looking across at her. “Yep,” I say before pushing my tray of food away, though this time, it’s not my body issues that has me not wanting to eat, it’s the fact that I’m so ashamed of myself that the thought of allowing Nate in like that makes me feel sick to my stomach.

“Noted,” Brooke teases. “Let me know when you’re ready to re-join the world,” she adds before turning back to the girls and getting on with their conversation while giving me a chance to continue sulking in peace.

I don't feel that familiar stare on me so I take a deep breath and brave looking over there. I let out a sigh of relief when I find he's not there, but Jesse is, and he's watching me with calculating eyes, probably still wondering what the hell is up with me.

I give Jess a little smile and turn back to my table, which is when the door of the cafeteria opens. Nate walks in with a girl from my health class tucked under his arm and the sight has me ready to break down.

I was played like a fucking toy.

I watch with anger and hurt as they walk across the cafeteria and over to his usual table with his friends. He sits down and the girl falls into his lap before his eyes flick across to me. His stare cuts into me like a knife and I want nothing more than to go over there and tear him a new asshole.

I flick my eyes away as the sadness seeps out of me, leaving only anger behind. I want to hurt him just like he hurt me and the way the girl seals her lips to his has me pulling out my phone and getting him where it hurts. His best friend. Parker Jones. The one guy in the school who anyone can depend on for a good time. The guy who believes any hole is a goal.

Tora – Hey! What's going on?

I look across the cafeteria to Parker and watch with a grin as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and scans over the message. His eyes flick up and he looks across at me with a seductive smile.

Parker – Hey, babe. Not much. What are you doing tonight?

My grin widens as his message is telling me that Nate hasn't said a word about what happened between us. If he had, Parker would have deleted the text and never responded. I hit reply.

Tora – I'm free tonight. Come over?

His eyes flick back up to mine and I can practically hear him from across the room as he says, "Fuck yeah." Nate looks across at him and watches as he types something on his phone. A second later, my phone chimes.

Parker – Aren't you staying with Nate and Jess?

The way Parker looks back up at me has Nate's eyes cutting across to

me as he realizes who Parker is texting. I give Parker my man-eating smile from across the room and hash out my reply. I hit send a moment before Nate steals the phone out of Parker's unexpected hands.

Tora – Not anymore.

Parker tries to steal the phone back as Nate scrolls through the messages. Anger flashes in his eyes and I grin to myself for a job well done. That grin only gets bigger when Nate pushes the girl off him and flies to his feet. He throws Parker's phone across the room and it smashes against the wall before he glares at Parker. "Stay the fuck away from her," he demands with every eye in the room on him. A moment later, he barges his way through the door of the cafeteria and disappears.

Parker looks back at me with wide eyes and shrugs. "Sorry, babe," he tells me and though he's far away, I can still make it out.

I shrug my shoulders back at him and give him an apologetic smile as if to say 'Oh, well. Maybe next time.' I flick my gaze across to Jesse who has witnessed the whole thing, only now, the calculating look is gone and is replaced with understanding. And just like that, I realize he knows exactly what went down between us.

He gets up from his seat and tilts his head, indicating for me to follow him. I don't want to go, especially out the doors that Nate had just gone, but I have a feeling he'll just come back in and drag me out with him. "I'll be back," I tell Brooke who's completely oblivious to everything that's just gone on.

She nods and I get up out of my seat before following Jesse out the door.

I find him leaning against the wall and he instantly puts his arm over my shoulder and leads me away. "You fucked him, didn't you?" he questions.

I let out a sigh and hang my head. "Don't say it like that," I tell him.

"Like what?" he defends as he pushes out the doors and leads me down the corridor of the junior's lockers.

"You make it sound dirty."

"Wasn't it?" he questions.

I shake my head as he comes to a stop beside his locker. “I didn’t think it was until this morning,” I admit.

He presses his lips together and nods in understanding as he puts in the combination for his locker. “He left, didn’t he? He hurt you. That’s why you weren’t there this morning.”

I nod my head as he gets his locker open and reaches in to pull out an apple. He hands it over and I reluctantly take it. “I never would have done it if I thought he was just playing me. I mean, I’ve never felt so used before. He just turned me into one of his conquests.”

Jesse closes his locker and leans back into it while giving me a sad smile. “Do you need me to kick his ass?” he asks.

At that, a grin finally crosses my lips. “No,” I laugh. “If anyone is going to kick his ass, it’s going to be me.”

“That’s the spirit,” he says. “Why don’t you come back to my place? We can chill out and watch a movie.”

“Netflix and chill?” I scoff. “You’re not trying to get into my pants too, are you?”

“What? No,” he laughs. “No offense, I think you’re fucking hot, but I’m not into you like that. I just see you as one of the guys who’s a lot nicer to look at. Though, if you’re offering, I’m not going to say no.”

“Gross,” I laugh with a sigh of relief. I don’t know if I could handle that kind of attention from both of them.

“What’s it going to be?” he asks as he reaches into his locker again and pulls out his keys. “Are you coming?”

“Nah,” I say as I lift the apple to my mouth. “I can’t ditch two afternoons in a row, and besides, I’m trying to avoid Nate as much as possible right now. Walking straight into the lion’s den would be stupid,” I explain. “I’ll see you later.”

“Alright,” he says with an eye roll before grabbing his things and closing his locker. He takes off down the hallway and pushes through the door at the other end without so much of a goodbye.

I shake my head to myself as I walk back into the cafeteria eating his

stupid apple. Happy that while my heart is hurting and my world seems to be falling apart, I still have a good friend in Jesse, even though it's his brother who has caused all this pain.

Chapter 16

I get home from school and collapse down into my bed. I close my eyes, taking in the feel of laying in my own bed. A bed that isn't tainted with Nathaniel Ryder.

I haven't heard from Brooke all afternoon, but I'm not surprised after I was such a bitch today. I'm going to have to make it up to her, though I'm sure she's probably out screwing Maxen right about now, so that will have to wait.

I get my homework sorted and get through the things that I missed yesterday while I was busy skipping and having the time of my life with Nate. I get myself something to eat, force it down, and before I know it, I'm right back on my bed with nothing to occupy my mind except for my night with Nate.

Why did it have to be so good? If he was just playing, why couldn't he have made it boring and disappointing? Instead, all I want to do is go back for more and see what else he can do with that body of his.

I shouldn't feel like that though. I should be hating on him. I should be cursing his name and finding a little Nate voodoo doll that I can stick pins into. Instead, I'm thinking about how he held my hands as he pushed up into me. How he kissed my neck and made sure I was ok.

Shit. This sucks.

I grab the blanket off my bed and trudge downstairs. I get myself comfortable on the couch and practically cocoon myself in the blanket while I wallow in a pit of my own self-destruction.

I hear the front door open before it's slammed shut. I don't need to wait to see who it is. I just know, and all I see is red.

I fly up off the couch and storm through my house. I find Nate on my stairs heading up to my room on his mission to find me. "Hey, asshole," I call after him. He stops and turns around to find me glaring up at him. "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here," I demand. "And how the hell

did you get in? I changed the damn code.”

He flies back down the stairs and is in my face in a matter of seconds, glaring right back at me. “March sixth. 0306. The day Trixie died,” he tells me as I gasp at how easily he recited the day my family’s Labrador passed away. “I fucking know you, Tora. I know you better than you know yourself.”

“You don’t know me,” I argue. “You might know facts, but you don’t know me.”

“Bullshit,” he says. “Why the fuck are you hitting on Parker? Is he here?”

“What’s it to you?” I demand as I push impossibly closer. “Jealous?”

His eyes narrow on me. “You fucking wish.”

I continue to glare at him as I slowly shake my head. “I never should have let last night happen,” I tell him before pushing him back a step. “How could I have been so stupid to fall for that shit? Was it just a game to you? Do you enjoy treating girls like shit and making them feel worthless?” I seethe before stepping into him and pushing him again. “I knew it,” I say as the anger completely overwhelms me. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you. I should have saved myself for someone who deserved it.”

“Saved yourself?” he grunts as he catches my hands in his, stopping me from pushing him again. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I rip my hands back out of his. “Nothing,” I say, realizing my mistake way too late. “Please, just go.”

He ignores me and pushes into the wall, grabbing my hands so I can’t possibly escape. “What are you talking about?” he repeats. “You slept with Carter Williams last year.”

My eyes narrow on his as the anger becomes nearly too much to bear. “No, I didn’t,” I tell him. “We went on one date and he told everyone he fucked me in the cinema parking lot. He was such a pig, I left halfway through dinner. We didn’t even make it to the movies.”

He just stares at me, clearly very lost in thought. “You were a virgin?” he murmurs in shock.

“And he finally gets it,” I cheer with sarcasm as I push him off me again.

“Fuck,” he curses before walking away and from the look in his eyes, I fear for my walls. He looks back at me. “I should never have done it.”

Pain rips through me and I somehow manage to stand before him without shedding a single tear. “Wow, you really know how to make a girl feel special,” I grunt. “Maybe you should have brought a gun and shot me. That would have stung less. So, please, if you’re finished insulting me, then make yourself acquainted with the door and get the hell out.”

With that, I turn and walk straight up the stairs, not bothering to look back at him.

I get into my room, pleased he hasn’t tried to stop me and close the door behind me. I lock it and lean back against it before sliding to the ground. I force myself not to cry. I’ve already done enough of that today, but then, those comments ripped straight through me.

How could he have said that? Is it me that he finds so repulsive or is it the fact I was a virgin? Either way, I’m right back where I was a week ago. Completely riddled with self-doubt and major body image issues. I mean, I don’t get it. Maybe if I dyed my hair blonde and got some blue contact lenses, I’d fit in with all the Malibu barbies around here. Maybe then I’d feel beautiful because right now, I feel anything but.

The door handle wiggling has me jolting out of my inner thoughts. It’s been at least ten minutes. I thought he was gone, probably finding some other poor defenseless girl to screw over. “Tora, open the door,” Nate says quietly from the other side.

I don’t respond, just sit here, wishing for it to end.

I hear his sigh as he realizes I’m taking the stubborn route. “Tora, I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t mean that I shouldn’t have done it at all, I meant that I shouldn’t have done it like that. I don’t regret sleeping with you, not one fucking bit.”

I sit up a little straighter and keep listening. Only, he goes quiet. “Shit,” he finally says before I hear a bang down the hallway. “Why is it always so hard to talk to you?”

At that, I get up off the floor and flick the lock on the door. I sit on my bed and bring my knees up into my chest before curling my arms around myself. The door slowly opens and Nate walks into my room, keeping his eyes on me.

He walks over to the very edge of my room, keeping as far away from me as possible before leaning against the wall and watching me. We're both silent for a while and the tension in the room is nearly killing me. "I don't regret it," he murmurs into the quiet room.

I raise my eyes to him and study him, waiting for whatever explanation he's going to throw at me. "It's just... if I knew it was your first time, I would have made it different. I would have made it... special, I guess."

I let out a breath. "It was special," I tell him. "I thought it meant something until you walked out and proved, once and for all, that I can't trust you. You're an asshole, Nate. Right down to the core. You treat women as objects and leave them feeling used and dirty."

He walks forward and drops down to his knees before me, putting his eyes level with mine, he reaches out and pulls me close to him. "Don't say that," he tells me.

"Which part?" I question. "All of it's true."

"That you can't trust me."

"I don't understand you, Nate. You're so hot and cold. One minute, you're the guy who has treated me like shit for five years, the next you're forcing me to live with you and saving me from guys like Josh and Jackson. Then you go right back to being a prick. I mean, did you say all those things last night just to get me in bed?"

His eyes search out mine. "I meant every fucking word, Tora."

"Then what is it? Do you enjoy hurting me? Do you like seeing me suffer?"

"No, of course not."

"And that right there is why I can't trust you," I tell him. His eyebrows pull down in confusion so I continue on. "Everything you do hurts me, Nate. You do all these things that build me up and have me hoping for

something more and then your very next step is to tear me down. How could you not know that walking out last night and being with that girl today wasn't going to hurt me?"

He watches me for a moment before cringing. "We're not together, Tora," he says, cutting the knife in deeper.

"Believe me," I say. "I know. It's just... your actions hurt, whether you mean them to or not."

He studies me for a moment before realization hits. "You like me," he says and I know he means more than just in the 'want to get naked with him' kind of way. I don't answer him, but I don't need to, he knows. After all, I'm not the kind of girl to just climb in bed with anyone. "Why?" he questions.

I let out a heavy breath. "Because when it's just you and me, and you've left your bad attitude at the door, like the way it is right now, you make me feel like the only girl in the world."

He nods his head. "You are the only girl in the world," he tells me so quietly I have to strain to hear him.

I reach out and run my fingers down the side of his handsome face. "You like me, too," I challenge.

He presses his lips together and I see I'm right. It all makes sense. The sweet things he says. How he taught me to drive my car yesterday. How he's patient with me. How he saves me from guys like Josh and Jackson. Nate Ryder likes me and it's in more than the 'want to get naked with me' kind of way.

He pulls me into him and presses his lips to mine. I release my hold around my legs and let them fall down on either side of him so I can get closer. He holds me tight to his body while he kisses me and all too soon, he pulls away. "I don't deserve you, Tora," he tells me before pushing away and standing.

I think back to everything he has done over the past five years and look him dead in the eye. "No," I tell him. "You don't."

I watch on with a pain in my chest as he walks out the door and gently closes it behind him, leaving me with more questions than I had

started with.

I collapse into my bed as I touch my lips, loving the feel of his lips upon mine and hate that things are this way between us. Why did he have to start being an ass five years ago? If things were the way they used to be when we were kids, we probably would have ended up dating at some point, right? It was inevitable. But now, not so much.

After he's gone, I make my way downstairs and put together something for dinner. It's nothing great but after only eating an apple today, I'm actually pretty hungry, and to be honest, Nate telling me the truth and being open with me went a long way in erasing the self-doubt that had crept into my mind during the day. He told me he meant what he said and what's more, I believe him.

I mean, nobody can possibly lie that convincingly. He told me with his heart on his sleeve and I know that he enjoys messing with me, but this past week with him has been different.

As I get through my dinner, my phone rings on the kitchen counter beside me. I smile down at the caller ID before swallowing my bite and bringing the phone up to my ear. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey," she says on a yawn. "How are you?"

"I've had better days," I tell her honestly.

"Oh, darling," she sighs. "Do you need to talk about it?"

"No," I say as I let out a breath. "It's nothing I can't handle."

"If you say so," she says, not believing me one bit, but choosing to let it go which tells me she must be tired.

"Why are you calling so late?" I ask. "What's the time over there?"

"Nearly two in the morning," she sighs.

"Is everything ok?" She lets out a heavy breath before sucking in another. "Mom?" I question when she doesn't respond.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. It looks like we'll be away for a little longer than we had expected," she explains. "Nanna's doctors are wanting to try some experimental treatments on her, and well, you know your Nanna."

"Oh," I sigh as a wave of sadness comes over me, for both my Nanna

and my parents. “When do you think you’ll be back?” I question.

“I’m honestly not sure, Tora,” she tells me. “We should know some more details in the next few days.”

I let out another sigh, realizing there’s really nothing I can do about it. Nanna needs my parents more than I do right now and I’m not about to be the reason for my parents coming home. As far as I’m concerned, as long as Nanna needs them, then they are hers. I can suck it up, after all, I have Trish and Cade looking out for me.

“Ok, mom. That’s fine, take all the time you need.”

“Are you sure?” she asks. “You know we’d come home if you needed us.”

“I’ll be ok,” I tell her. “I have Trish and Jesse is being a good friend too. I also figured out how to do home delivery with the groceries.”

“What are you getting groceries delivered for? Aren’t you staying with Trish?”

“Oh, um... yeah. Kind of. It’s more like half/half. I don’t want to overstay my welcome,” I explain.

“Don’t be silly,” she tells me. “I would be much more comfortable if you were there all the time. I’d know you were safe that way. Promise me you’ll stay there?”

I let out a huff. “Fine,” I tell her, knowing if she wasn’t dealing with so much right now, I’d probably fight her on it. “I’ll go back tonight.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Listen, that reminds me. Your father got a notification that the code for the front gate was changed.”

“Oh, yeah,” I tell her. “I changed it. I hope that’s ok, but apparently, everybody knows it’s my birthday.”

“Oh,” she gasps. “Then, yes. Of course, you did the right thing, sweetie,” she says with another yawn. “I better get to bed,” she adds. “We have another big day tomorrow.”

“Ok, mom. Wish Nanna well for me.”

“I will,” she says with a smile in her voice. “Love you, honey. And remember, straight back to Trish’s place.”

“Alright,” I groan. “I promise.”

With that, she ends the call and I find myself huffing and puffing as I finish off my dinner and pack my bags again.

Half an hour later, I’m parking my car beside Nate’s and slipping through their front door. It’s after nine at night and nobody is downstairs, so I’m assuming everyone is already holed up in their rooms.

I make my way up the stairs and find Jesse in the hallway coming out of his room. Nate’s door is closed and right now, I’m thankful for that. “Well, well, well,” Jesse laughs. “Look who comes crawling back.”

“Shut up,” I laugh as I push through my door and drop my bag in the closet. I walk over and drop down onto my bed as Jesse walks on in with a DVD. He slides it into the player and turns it on before making himself comfortable on the couch. “You good?” I question as I watch him, completely dumbfounded.

“Shut up,” he says. “You’re ruining the movie.”

I shake my head and get comfortable. “You may as well go and get the popcorn.”

He grins and a second later, he flies out the door. I get myself dressed into my pajamas while I wait and turn around to find Nate standing in my doorway watching me.

Without saying a word, he walks up to me, pulls me into his body and presses a kiss to my forehead before walking over to my bed and getting comfortable. I finish getting myself dressed and walk over to him before falling in beside him. His arm wraps around me and he pulls me in tight beside him.

A moment later, Jesse walks back in with three bowls of popcorn. He takes one look at Nate and grins to himself. “I fucking knew it,” he says before handing over the goods.

As usual, Mr. Broody doesn’t say anything, just takes the bowl of popcorn and places it down on the bed beside him before grabbing one and popping it into his mouth.

I scoot down in the bed a little more and rest my head against Nate’s chest as his arm curls around my shoulder and holds me against him. Jesse

goes back to his spot on the couch and a moment later, hits play so we can all get lost in the world of *'Transformers'*.

By the end of the movie, Jesse is fast asleep on the couch and I'm just moments from falling asleep as well.

Nate leans down and grabs one of the many pillows discarded on the floor and launches it across to his sleeping brother. "Hey," he calls out, making me grin. "Get out of here."

Jesse groans and grabs the pillow before squishing it under his head, making a point of not leaving. At that, my grin grows wider. "Looks like we're stuck with him," he tells me.

"We're?" I ask.

"Yeah, babe," he says as he reaches across and flicks off the lamp. "I'm not sleeping knowing you're right across the hallway in a room with my horny brother."

"Well then," I say, getting up off the bed and taking his hand. "Looks like we're sleeping in your room." He grins and gets up off the bed before following me out the door. I get to his door when I turn around and stop him. "Just sleeping," I tell him.

"Uh huh," he murmurs as he leans down and goes for my lips.

"Nate," I warn.

"Fine," he groans. "Just sleeping, but be prepared, I'm still going to kiss you."

I grin up at him. "That's more than fine with me."

He slides his arms around me and grabs me under my ass before lifting me up and pushing his way into his room. His lips come crashing down on mine as my legs wrap around him.

A moment later, we go crashing down to his bed with all rules of just sleeping completely forgotten.

Chapter 17

It's Friday night and I've spent every single night this week sleeping in Nate's arms, though, it's not like we're together or anything. We live our normal lives and at night, he slips into my room and wraps me in his warm arms. Apart from that, everything is exactly how it was before, except for the glaring. There's not so much of that anymore, though, that doesn't mean his eyes aren't always on me.

I have no idea what's going on between us. We're not together, but we're not... not together.

He kisses me first thing in the morning and slips out of my room. The three of us sit down at the breakfast bar and eat, that's when Jesse doesn't sleep through his alarm, of course. Most days, Nate drives me to school and then we go our separate ways.

He spends his days with the boys and I spend mine with the girls. It's kind of nice. I don't have to dodge his rude comments or nasty glares anymore. Though, if I'm being honest, there's just one tiny little thing that still bugs me and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it, and that's all the girls.

I haven't actually seen him physically being with any of them or kissing anyone, but I see the flirting. I see the girls pining for his attention. I see the way they discreetly slide into his side and his arm naturally curls around them. I see the way he winks and gives them the attention they want.

But like he said. We're not together. Nor do I want to be... Ok, that's a lie. I do want to be, so freaking bad but my head is telling me it's wrong. It's telling me that I'll get hurt. That on some level this is still a sick joke. It's telling me to ignore my heart and do the smart thing.

It's just after nine and I'm all curled up in the den with my Kindle when Nate and Jesse come tearing into the house. "Tora?" Nate calls out.

"In here," I yell back.

Both Nate and Jesse come striding in with big ass grins on their faces,

but the second they see me curled up on the couch, their faces instantly drop. “What the fuck are you doing?” Jesse grunts. “Why aren’t you ready?”

“Huh?” I grunt right back at him. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re going out,” he says, waving his hands around before turning towards Nate. “Fuck man. I’m not waiting around for an hour for her to do all that girly shit.”

“Where are we going?” I question, looking towards Nate.

“I got a race,” he tells me.

Jesse cuts off whatever Nate was about to say. “But you’re not coming unless you can be dressed and ready in three minutes.”

I stand up before Jesse and put my hands on my hips. “Was I supposed to just read your mind and automatically know that I was supposed to be going out?”

“No,” he grunts. “You’re seventeen. You’re supposed to just assume you’re going out and be ready at all times.”

“Are you ready at all times?”

He grins at me as he digs into his pocket and pulls out four condoms. “I’m always ready to go,” he laughs.

“Ugh,” I groan as I walk past him and head for the stairs. “You’re a pig.”

“So you keep telling me,” he calls after me.

I start stripping off my shirt halfway up the stairs and the second I step into my closet, I’m already ready to pull a dress over my head. Within the space of two seconds, I pull out a pair of knee-high boots and pull them on before grabbing a jacket to throw over the top. I whip the elastic out of my hair, give it a little shake and walk back down the stairs thirty seconds later.

I walk into the kitchen to find the boys diving through the fridge. They hear me coming and naturally, Jesse doesn’t even look up. “Get your ass up there and get ready,” he groans into the fridge.

Nate grins at me and I can’t help but laugh. “What do you say we leave without him?”

Jesse's head whips out of the fridge and he looks at me over the top of the open door. "Fuck me," he says looking down at his watch. "How'd you get ready so fast?"

"Call it a gift," I tell him before grabbing my phone from the den. "Alright, douche bags, let's go."

They follow me out the door and I walk straight down to Nate's Camaro. "Aren't you coming?" I ask Jesse who walks towards his Escalade.

"Nope," he says with a wink as he pulls out one of the many condoms in his pockets. "Change of plans. I've got a date with one of these first."

I scrunch up my face at him as Nate chuckles to himself before unlocking his car and getting in. I walk around to the other side and climb in beside him before getting comfortable.

Nate peels out of the driveway behind Jesse and pulls off to the right as Jesse goes to the left. He reaches forward and hits a few buttons before music comes blaring out of the speakers.

I sit back and listen to the song as I get lost inside my head. I've been dreading tonight all week. Not that I knew we were going anywhere, but I knew eventually, we'd be at a party together and I have no idea how it's going to go. I mean, is he going to be hooking up with other girls or is it going to be me? I can't help but wonder who's going to be in his bed tonight.

The thought of it not being me kind of kills me, but it's a reality I have to be prepared for. I'm not his girlfriend. I don't think that's a step either one of us ready for, hell, I don't even know if that's something that will ever happen. With our past being so rocky, it's probably something that I won't be able to move on from.

I can't help but look across and find myself drooling. He looks so damn good, especially when he drives and works the gear stick like a professional. He looks across at me and smirks when he catches me checking him out. "You about done?" he questions with fire in his eyes.

"Not even close," I grin.

He pulls down the same dirt road he had come down last week and I find myself sitting up a little straighter. "Is this even legal?" I question. He scoffs and I can't help but look across at him as a grin rips across his face.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” I laugh. “Aren’t you worried about getting caught?”

He shakes his head as he focuses on the dirt road. “Do you think I’m the kind of guy who’s worried about getting caught?”

“You should be,” I tell him. “You’re eighteen. You could get in all kinds of serious trouble. Not to mention, it could screw up your chances of getting into a good college.”

He shrugs his shoulders and I find myself looking away. Clearly, it’s not something he’s going to be easily swayed on. Besides, this is Nate Ryder. He’s going to do whatever the hell he wants to do, no matter how much trouble he could get in. “Jesse said you did a lot of work on your car,” I say.

He nods his head as a proud smile crosses his lips. “Yep,” he says. “There’s still a few more things I want to add though.”

“I never knew you were into building cars.”

“It’s what I want to do,” he says, reminding me of the drawings Brooke had found in his room. “Restore cars.”

“Huh,” I grunt to myself. “I guess that explains why you’re not too worried about college.”

“Nope,” he grins. “A business degree isn’t really going to help me rebuild an engine.”

“I guess not, but it would help you to run a successful business,” I say as he passes the rock I had sat on while waiting for Brooke to rescue me last week. He turns the corner and I see all the same lights and people that were here last week. “You don’t want to get into racing?” I question.

“Nah,” he says. “This is just for fun.”

“Who are you against tonight?” I ask.

We drive a little closer and he points out a green car that looks like it’s had a bit of work done to it. “Damien Kelly,” he says. “He was a senior last year.”

“Is he good?” I ask as I eye the green car, instantly hoping the guy loses.

“He’s alright,” he tells me. “He blew up his engine a few months ago so this will be his first race with the new one. I’m pretty sure I’ll beat him

though. The guy is too cocky.”

“Sounds like somebody else I know,” I laugh.

He grins as he drives through all the people, the same way he had done last week, but he doesn’t drive straight down to the track. Nate stops his car and I reach for the door handle. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I’m not about to be in here when you’re racing again. That shit is way too much for me to handle.”

“Tough shit,” he tells me. “Do you have any idea what kind of people are here? If one of the boys were here to stay with you, then sure, but they’re not, which means you get another up close and personal view of the track.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right?”

“Trust me,” he says, turning towards me. “I wish I was. It’s not easy concentrating while you’re screaming in my ear like a little bitch.”

“Ahhhhh,” I say with a hard sarcasm. “There’s the good old Nate. I thought I’d lost you for a while.”

He rolls his eyes and focuses all his attention on the race that’s just starting on the track while I find myself completely zoning out and people watching. I see a few familiar faces that I recognize from school, but not many, though they all seem quite young. “Are all these people from the public school?” I question.

“Most of them,” he says. “They’re not a good crowd to be around. Most of them are into some pretty heavy shit, but they’re fun to party with,” he tells me. “Your boyfriend should be here.”

“Boyfriend?” I grunt.

“Jackson,” he says. “The guy who tried to take you home from my place.”

I look around the crowd and sure enough, the arrogant jerk is right there with a beer in his hand and a girl under his arm as he screams out towards the race. “Ugh,” I grunt, glad that I escaped from that one unscathed, though, that’s mainly thanks to Nate.

“We’re up,” he suddenly says, drawing my attention away from the

bystanders.

He starts rolling his car down the hill towards the start of the track and my heart starts pounding in my chest. “Do we really have to do this?” I question. “I mean, I’m sure it’s not too late to back out.”

“Stop being such a pussy,” he tells me. “I don’t back out of races. Besides, at least you got a little warning this time.”

I narrow my eyes on him and double check my seatbelt is secure before watching as the girl walks up between the two cars to start the race. “If I have to suffer through this thing, then you better win.”

“I always do,” he tells me before reaching forward and turning the music right up.

I try to relax, but a few seconds later the girl starts the race and Nate takes off. “Holy shit,” I groan to myself making Nate chuckle under his breath. I look across at him because honestly, watching the track is too terrifying.

Just like last time, he races around the track like a boss. I look around him to see where Damien is and find him trying to creep up on the side of Nate, but Nate hits the corner and drifts around it while Damien backs off.

The fear seeps out of me and I realize that if I don’t focus on the track ahead of us, but watch the race as more of a spectator, then I don’t feel like throwing up. “Hold on,” Nate says with a smirk, showing me just how much he enjoys this.

I flick my head around to see another corner creeping up which Nate flies around, sending me falling to the side and reaching for something to grasp on to. It’s a good thing I have my seatbelt on, otherwise, I probably would have gone tumbling around. “Fuck,” I grunt, as I catch myself.

“I told you to hold on,” he says as he hits the gas and shifts up into top gear to speed down the final straight of the track.

I roll my eyes and he looks across at me with a proud, smug grin. We haven’t even crossed the finish line but he knows he’s already won it. “I’m pretty damn good, huh?”

“Eh,” I say with a shrug. “You’re not bad. My R8 could have beat you though.”

“Ha,” he laughs as he crosses the finish line and brings the car to a stop. “Do you want to make a bet?”

“You know, I would,” I grin. “But I think I’m busy that day.”

“Uh huh,” he laughs as the car comes to a complete stop and all the people around the track start running down to congratulate him.

“What is this?” I laugh. “People treat you as though you’re some sort of celebrity around here.”

Again, he looks across at me with that proud, smug smirk. “Because I am,” he says, making me groan. He looks back at the crowd of people and cringes. “Ugh.”

“What?” I ask, trying to look around the crowd for whatever has him cringing.

He nods his head straight forward and I look that way. “It’s Ashley,” he groans. “She won’t leave me alone. I swear, she’s sent me over one hundred text messages over the past week.”

“You’re kidding?” I laugh.

“I wish I was.”

An idea strikes and I grin at Nate. “You really want to get rid of her?”

“More than you could possibly know.”

With that, I unbuckle my seatbelt and he watches me with a curious gaze. “You asked for it,” I tell him before climbing across the center console and coming to a stop on his lap. I wrap my arms around his neck as I straddle him and he grins back at me as his hands slide down to my ass.

I seal my lips to his and he responds instantly, making my body burn with need. His hands roam over my back, ass, and thighs while mine fist into his dark hair, holding him closer.

It’s hot and quick, and when we pull away from each other, we’re both gasping for air. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he tells me.

“So, you keep telling me.”

“Do you believe it yet?”

I bite down on my bottom lip as I watch him. “Getting there,” I tell

him.

I know that answer isn't good enough for him, but it will have to do. He tilts his head to look around me and grins when he sees Ashley. I turn and watch the show as she stomps her foot and screams out before turning and huffing away. "You know," he tells me. "This is going to make people talk."

"Let them," I say with a shrug. "How's it any different from when they talk about it being a different girl? Which is all the time by the way."

"This one means something," he murmurs while pulling me in closer on his lap. I can't help but melt into him and press my lips to his again. "Half the stuff isn't true anyway."

"Really?" I say against his lips. "So, you didn't screw Jessica McMillian in the biology lab?"

He cringes.

"Or Laney in the back of this very car before doing her doggy style over the top of the hood?"

He cringes again.

"Or, Sa-"

He cuts me off by crushing his lips to mine again. "Ok, maybe most of it is true, but I didn't screw Mrs. Phillips in the teachers' lounge." Oh, thank god. "It was in the biology lab."

"Are you kidding, right now?"

"Yeah," he laughs. "She's too old for my liking."

"You're such an idiot."

He grins back at me. "Come on," he says before pushing me back. "Screw saying hi to all these people. I want to get this party over and done with so I can take you home."

"That's fine by me," I tell him as I get myself comfortable in his passenger's side chair. "But you better make it good otherwise I'll have to do it myself."

He looks across at me with a smirk that could melt my underwear right off my body. "Now that I'd like to watch."

I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest. “Get moving, Romeo.”

With that, he laughs to himself and peels out of the race track. Twenty minutes later, we’re pulling up at Parker’s place, ready for a good night.

Chapter 18

The second Nate and I step out of his car, we go our separate ways, just as we do at school. I walk around Parker's home and squeeze myself through the throng of bodies as I watch Nate with a scowl as the bodies just seem to part for him before a beer is thrust straight into his hand and girls start gravitating towards him, hoping to be the special one he chooses to bury himself in tonight.

Hell, maybe if they're lucky, he might choose a few of them. The jealousy rips through me and I have to remind myself that we're not together and remember the fact that Nate was an asshole for nearly five years of my life. I've been forgetting that a lot over the past two weeks, especially when he treats me so good and makes me feel things that I've never felt before.

"Tora," I hear my name being called from across the room.

My head whips around to find Brooke sitting on Maxen's lap with a red cup in her hand, and from the look of it, I'd dare say she's already wasted. I hold my hand up to say 'wait a minute' and duck past the kitchen to get myself a drink.

I find Jesse there, lining up a row of shots for a few girls and I grin as I come up next to him. "You're here early," I say. "I thought you would have been, ah... entertaining a little longer."

He stops pouring the shots and turns so he can narrow his eyes on me. "And just what are you implying, Tori?" he says, using the nickname he knows I hate.

I can't help the laughter that bubbles up within me. "Oh, nothing," I tell him. "Just that it mustn't have lasted very long."

"I'll have you know," he tells me. "I absolute blew that girl's mind. Three times, actually."

"Uh huh," I laugh as I steal one of the shots and throw it back before pouring myself a drink. "What was the girl's name?"

"Why?" he questions. "You want to go and check with her just how

good I was?”

“No,” I laugh. “I want to see if you can remember her name.”

“Oh, um, it was...,” his eyes narrow further, though this time it’s in pure concentration. “It was... Shit.”

Laughter comes tearing out of me. “That’s what I thought,” I say before scooping my drink off the table and heading back towards where Brooke’s three seconds away from giving Maxen a lap dance. “Hey,” I say as I fall down into the space beside them.

“Hey,” she mimics with an annoyed tone. “Where the hell have you been? The party started ages ago.”

“I was at Nate’s race,” I explain as her eyes narrow on me.

“Huh?” Maxen grunts, leaning forward to see me around Brooke. “What do you mean you were at his race? Who’d you stay with? We were all here.”

“What are you talking about?” I question as Brooke continues watching me.

“Me, Parker, Ty, and Jesse. We were all here while the race was on so he must have left you with someone.”

“No,” I say shaking my head. “I was with him.”

“During the race?”

“Yes,” I say, completely confused.

“Whoa,” he says, sitting back with a look of astonishment on his face.

Brooke turns around and fixes him with a hard stare. “You better start explaining yourself or you can go find someone else to screw tonight.”

He gives her a fond smile before turning back to me. “Nate doesn’t race with anyone. It’s like his golden rule. None of us boys have even been in the car with him while he raced, not even Jess.”

“Really?” I grunt. “Because he did it last week as well. Though that was because he was trying to scare the shit out of me, which it worked by the way, I nearly crapped myself. Do you have any idea how fast he goes?”

Maxen nods his head before a knowing grin comes over his face.

“Yeah,” he laughs. “I’ve seen it.”

Brooke gets up off his lap and looks down at me. “We need to talk,” she demands before reaching down and grabbing my hand. She hoists me up out of my seat and pulls me along behind her. She drags me over to the massive staircase and turns to face me. “Spill it,” she says. “What the hell is going on between you and Nate?”

“Nothing’s going on,” I lie, hating how easily the lie came out of my lips. “We just live together. I was more than happy to stay home tonight, but the boys demanded I get ready and leave. I didn’t even know there was a race on until two minutes before we left.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she says with a crease between her eyebrows, letting me know she’s pissed. “Something’s going on between you two. He hasn’t made snide comments to you in two weeks, I catch you smiling at them all the time, Jesse is suddenly your new BFF, and Nate’s driving you around all the time even though you know how to drive your own car now,” she points out. “You’re my best friend, Tora. You have been for years which is how I know you’re lying to me.”

“There’s not,” I argue as I look around and find him. “Look,” I say, pointing him out. She spins around to find him to see the same gut-wrenching scene that I do. Nate Ryder with a girl pressed up against his chest and his arm wrapped around her body. “If something were going on between us, that’d be me, but it’s not.”

She narrows her eyes on me again and I see the moment she decides not to believe me. “You’re an idiot to get involved with him,” she tells me. “Or have you forgotten how he treated you over the last five years? Because I sure as hell haven’t. I was the one who had to put you back together each time.”

“Brooke. There’s nothing going on,” I tell her. “He’s just being nice because we have to live together.”

She presses her lips together as she considers me and is about to say something when we hear someone calling out. “You,” a screechy voice yells.

We turn and find Ashley storming up towards me with her finger pointed right at me. My eyes flick across to Nate who I notice is watching

the show with interest.

Ashley storms right up into me and presses her finger into my chest. “You’re a slut,” she yells for everyone to hear. “What do you think you’re doing with him? He’s mine.”

I step back away from her but she follows right along. “You go and act all innocent like you’re this precious little angel, but we all know the truth. You’re a boyfriend stealing whore. You were in his bed last week and all over him tonight. Don’t act like I didn’t see you together in his car, rubbing yourself all over him. He’s going to come crawling straight back once he realizes you’re nothing.”

My eyes cut across to Brooke who looks at me with absolute betrayal and my heart breaks. She presses her lips into a hard line before turning on her heel and disappearing, leaving me to deal with Ashley.

I can’t help but push her back a step. I don’t know what it is but living with the Ryder brothers has me growing a new backbone. Last week it was Elle and now Ashley. “Don’t you dare come and get up in my face like that,” I tell her as I push her back again. “Nate doesn’t want you. He never did. You weren’t his girlfriend, remember? You were nothing but an easy screw to him. You were convenient and you ruined a good thing by running your mouth.”

Her face flames, but I’m not quite done. I’ve got the knife in, but now I need to twist it. “I wonder, Ash. Did he ever race with you? Did he ever let you in like that?” I get in nice and close and whisper just for her to hear. “Because he lets me in like that all the damn time.”

A scowl fixes across her face and she gives me a hard stare before pushing me back. I laugh as I go flying back a few steps but she doesn’t come after me, so I keep going. “So, what if I was all over him at the race?” I tell her. “I’ll probably be all over him again later, and then probably tomorrow, and the next day, and then the next. And you know what’s better?” I question. “He doesn’t have to pretend with me.”

Ashley reaches her boiling point and launches herself forward. I can either run away or I can put up a fight, and with my best friend angry at me and my life a complete mess, I meet her in the middle.

Her hands come at me like claws and she scratches my face while I end up with a big chunk of hair between my fingers. She screams but we keep coming at each other.

Someone screams out ‘catfight’ and suddenly there are people crowding around everywhere.

An arm wraps around my waist and I’m hauled back from her as Parker shoves himself between us. “Stop,” Nate says in my ear before looking up at Jesse. “Get her out of here.”

With that, Jesse moves like lightning. He grabs Ashley around the waist and throws her over his shoulder before disappearing out the door with her screaming for him to put her down.

Nate grabs me by the shoulders and spins me to face him as everyone watches on in interest, wondering what the fuck is going on here, as usual, whenever me and Nate are facing each other, it’s bound to end with him saying something to shut me down.

“What the fuck was that about?” he roars, giving my shoulders a shake.

I find it impossible to remove the scowl off my face as I look up at him. “She started it,” I tell him, resisting the urge to tell him to fuck off. I mean, he already knows exactly what it was about. He was right there when I kissed him in the car, he was all for the plan then. He heard what she was yelling and I’m sure as hell that he heard what I was saying back. If anything, the douchebag should be thanking me.

“Well, I finished it,” he says, loud enough for the whole room to hear.

I narrow my eyes on him and pull myself out of his grip with a harsh tug. I spin on my heel and stalk away, pleased to find he isn’t following me. I walk down to the bathroom and lock the door behind me while I study myself in the mirror.

I have three scratches down the side of my face, all of which have drawn blood and my hair looks like an absolute mess. I let out a heavy breath as I lean forward on the sink before turning the tap and washing the blood off my face.

I run my fingers through my hair and give myself a few minutes to

cool down. I take a few slow breaths until I feel like I'm ready to face the world.

Feeling more like myself, I unlock the door and step out, hating that my face is bright red from the scratches but there's not a lot I can do about that.

I search around the party for Brooke but I can't find her anywhere and after asking Maxen where she went; he tells me she ran out of here like someone lit a match under her ass.

With a sigh, I walk back through the house and into the kitchen. There are people lingering around and the second they see me, they start offering me drinks and asking if I need anything. It takes a moment to realize they all think I'm dating Nate as any girl he deems good enough to actually date deserves the respect of the room. Not to mention, they're all probably scared I'm still wound up from the fight and am about to launch myself at them.

I grab a drink off one of the girls and walk deeper into the kitchen. How did my night go from being so damn good to being so sucky so quickly? I mean, I've only been here for twenty minutes and I've already betrayed my best friend, been in a catfight, and had Nate yell at me.

Tonight is shaping up to be a great night. It's like a dream come true.

I help myself into Parker's fridge and have a look around before sticking my head into the freezer. A tub of ice cream would do the trick but unfortunately, all I can see is a frozen pizza. I grab it out and go searching through the cupboards for an oven tray before working out how to turn the damn thing on.

A moment later, I pull myself up onto the counter and stare at the oven as it cooks my stupid pizza while people continue partying around me. Courtney and Bec appear at one end of the kitchen and give me a smile before stepping towards me when Nate appears at the end and sends them a scathing look that has them turning in the opposite direction.

Great friends they are.

Nate walks right up to me and leans down on the counter with a hand on either side of my thighs as he watches me. His eyes skim over the

scratches on my face and I see him trying his hardest not to reach out and brush his fingers over it. “Come on,” he says. “I’ll take you home.”

“Can’t,” I grunt. “I’m cooking a pizza.”

“What?” he says, looking at me as though I’ve just grown another head. I nod towards the oven and he turns around to take in the pizza that’s happily cooking away, completely oblivious to the fact it’s about to become someone’s dinner. “You should have told me you were hungry,” he says. “I would have bought you something proper.”

I shake my head, not really in the mood. “I’m fine,” I tell him as the timer on the oven goes off. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” I say. “My dinner is ready.”

He lets out a heavy breath and steps back toward the oven before turning the dials off and opening the oven door. He grabs a dish towel and rips the hot tray out of the oven before putting it down. Next, he finds me a plate, slides the hot pizza on to it before placing it down beside me with a look that says that what he had just done had highly inconvenienced him.

We get into a stare off before I hold up my empty cup and thrust it his way. I’m absolutely shocked when he actually takes it from me and refills it, though, he only pours soda in it, forgetting the vodka. Though, something tells me this is his way of an apology for being an ass earlier.

Nate places the drink down beside me and I don’t miss the way every eye in the room remains glued to us. “Is there anything else you need?” he questions, not giving a shit about who’s watching the show.

I shake my head and grab the pizza before taking a bite. He watches me chew before swallowing and taking another bite which is when I notice I didn’t hesitate. Pride flashes in his eye before he winks and walks away leaving me to my pity party.

An hour later, he returns and I haven’t moved from my spot on the counter. “Alright,” he says, grabbing me and hoisting me off the counter. “Enough of this sulking bullshit. I’m taking you home.”

“No,” I say, pulling my hand back out of his. “You stay and have fun. I’ll take myself home, just give me your keys.”

“Like hell,” he laughs before taking my hand again and leading me

through the big house. We get outside and we walk down to his car with his arm over my shoulder. “Are you ok?” he questions once we’re away from the prying eyes.

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “I just need to sleep it off.”

“Ok,” he murmurs as he unlocks the car and opens the door for me.

I slide in and a moment later he’s getting in on the driver’s seat and pulling away. As he drives down the street, I can’t help but think about what Brooke had said. I’m an idiot for getting involved with him, and she’d be right. What was I thinking? This guy beside me, while he’s been great for the past few weeks, was the guy who tormented me and made me feel small.

I still don’t even know why I was the lucky girl who deserved that kind of attention from him but let’s be real, it completely sucked.

I curl in on myself and bring my knees up to my chest as I turn and look at him. “What are we doing, Nate?” I question.

“What do you mean?” he asks. “I’m driving you home.”

“I mean you and me? We’re hooking up and sleeping together when two weeks ago, you hated me and I hated you because of it. We’re not together but most of the time you treat me as though we are, but then you had some girl all over you tonight and all I can think about is that I’m going to be the one to get hurt. Again.”

He starts shaking his head. “What are you trying to say, Tora?”

“I think we should stop.... Whatever this is.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” he says. “But that’s not an option.”

“Yes, it is,” I argue.

“No. It’s not,” he says as he pulls over on the side of the road so he can look at me. “Look,” he says reaching out and taking my hand. “I know I’ve been an ass and I know I haven’t treated you fairly, but if I could take it all back, believe me, I would. I know I don’t deserve you, but just... bear with me ok. I’m going to make it up to you.”

“What do you want from me?” I ask, confused as why he even bothers with me. I mean, I’m nothing special.

He lets out a sigh and I see that whatever he’s about to say is hard for

him to get out. “I don’t want anything from you, Tora. I just want you. I always have, ever since we were twelve and you were running around the pool in a bikini.”

“What?” I say as my brows lower in confusion. “That doesn’t make sense, Nate. You started being an ass when we were twelve. Why would you do that if you actually liked me?”

He shakes his head, not prepared to give me an answer and I let out a huff as I sit back in the seat. “I need answers, Nate.”

“I can’t give them to you,” he tells me. “I’m just... I’m sorry, ok. I wish I could take it all back. I hate myself for hurting you like that.”

I sit in silence, unsure of what to think or what to say, all I know is that I need to be alone right now. “Can you just take me home?” I ask as I look away from him.

He’s quiet for a moment and I feel him wanting to hash this out but he lets it go. “Ok,” he murmurs before turning back in his seat and pulling back out onto the road.

A few minutes later he pulls into his driveway and comes to a stop right by the front door. I unbuckle my seatbelt and a moment later, I watch as he goes to do the same. I reach my hand out and stop him. “Don’t,” I tell him. “Go back to the party. I just need to be alone,” I say. “Besides, all your adoring fans are waiting for you.”

With that, I push my way out of the car and hurry up the stairs to the front door. I push through the door, just as I hear him taking off down the long driveway. I don’t bother looking back as I have a feeling that watching him leave is going to hurt a whole lot more than I could ever imagine.

Chapter 19

I stayed holed up in my room all weekend and still have no idea where I stand with Nate. Brooke hasn't called or replied to any of my texts and I hate how things are between us. Jesse has had to be the go-between person at home as both Nate and I were being immature and refusing to come out of our rooms. And to top it all off, mom called last night to let me know that Nanna has come down with a cold which has had her plummeting into a downward spiral.

I can't fix things for Nanna and I can't work out what the hell I want with Nate, so the only thing I can do is try to fix things with Brooke. It's time to come clean and I'm hoping she'll give me the time of day to do that.

I walk through the school on Monday morning on the way to my locker and the first thing I notice is that she isn't here, though, her car was in the lot so I know she's here somewhere, she's probably just avoiding me. I even managed to get here early so I could have a chance to talk with her but I guess it's going to be a waiting game.

Josh, however, is here. He comes striding up to me and leans against the locker beside mine. "Is there something you need?" he questions.

"I heard you were giving it up for Nate," he says.

I flick my eyes up towards him and see a hint of anger behind his eyes. "What's the matter, Josh?" I question. "Jealous that I could be interested in someone other than you?"

"No," he scoffs. "Just wanted to see if the rumors were true. You know, the second he gets what he wants out of you, he's going to move on."

"You mean, the same way you would have?" I question. "The only difference between you and Nate is that he wouldn't have to get me drunk first."

His eyes narrow and I see I've hit a sore spot. He must hate that he's the quarterback and is supposed to be the most popular guy in school but no matter how hard he tries; all the attention is still on Nate and Jesse. Josh has

a handful of cheer skanks and that's about it.

I slam my locker and turn to face him front on. "You know, while we're on the topic of the differences between you and Nate, I might as well point out that he would never take advantage of a girl." Josh's brows pull down, unsure of what I'm talking about. "Nate would never allow some jealous bitch to talk him into sexually assaulting another girl just so she could get her petty revenge and humiliate her in front of the whole school."

His eyes widen as he realizes that I know all about his and Elle's plan to strip me naked and have him assault me on camera. I step in dangerously close and tilt my chin up towards him. "Just so you know," I whisper. "If you even think about touching me again, I'll destroy you."

A hand comes down on the locker beside me while another takes possession of my waist before a strong body presses into my back. "Is there something you need, Josh?" Nate says from behind me.

I sink into him while ignoring the eyes of everyone in the hallway. Josh's eyes flick down to me and I grin back up at him with a promise to follow through on what I'd just told him. "All good," Josh says before stepping back and turning away. He walks off down the hall and I turn around to face Nate. "Hey," I say quietly.

"What did he want?" he asks.

"He wanted to know if I'd let you screw me over yet."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That I'd prefer you to screw me over than him."

The corner of his mouth lifts in one hell of a sexy smirk as he looks down at me. "Hell yeah, you did," he says. "Though why do I feel like you're only telling me half the story?"

"Because I am," I say as I push up onto my tippy toes and press a kiss to his lips, again, not caring about the eyes on us and the gasps that are heard all over the room.

I step away from him to find Brooke watching us with a scowl. She turns away, slams her locker door and storms up the hallway. "Shit," I groan as I sink back into Nate.

He wraps his hand around my waist and kisses my neck. “She’ll come around,” he tells me before he releases me and walks away.

I lean back against my locker and give Courtney and Bec a smile as they come and go while I wait out the warning bell. Ten long minutes later, it finally rings and I make my way to my first class of the week by myself.

I fall down into my chair, pleased that by the third week everyone has decided to stick with the spot they chose the first week of class, meaning all other spots are taken when Brooke walks in. She scrunches up her face when she walks in and realizes that it’s time to face the music.

She walks forward and takes her seat beside me while doing a fantastic job of looking anywhere but at me. “Brooke,” I say before sighing as she continues to ignore me. “You have to talk to me at some point.”

She looks over at me as Mr. Miller turns to face the class “No, I don’t,” she says as Nate strolls in through the door, not giving a single fuck that he’s late again. Though, it makes me wonder where the hell he goes every morning. I mean, I only saw him ten minutes ago, it’s not like he was late for school. My wondering is cut short as Brooke narrows her eyes. “Oh, look,” she snaps. “It’s your secret boyfriend.”

“Brooke,” I groan as Nate walks past me and touches my shoulder on the way. I lower my voice as to not gain the attention of Mr. Miller. “He’s not my boyfriend. We’re just...” cringe.

“Just what?” she demands.

I look back at Mr. Miller who’s scowling at us and I give Brooke an apologetic look before facing the front.

Brooke scoffs and shakes her head. “That’s what I thought,” she murmurs under her breath.

I open to a new page on my notebook and silently rip a page out before writing down a note.

Can we talk about this?

I slide the note across to her and watch as she reads over it, I expect her to scrunch it up, but instead, she writes out a reply before sliding it back across to me.

I don't know if I'll believe anything you say.

Ouch. That one stung.

I still don't know if I believe it either.

Believe what?

Promise me you won't freak out?

Brooke looks across at me and narrows her eyes and I have no doubt whatever she's about to write is going to be a nasty stab.

I don't make promises to liars.

Fine... I've been sleeping with Nate for the past week.

I cringe as I slide the note across to her and study her reaction.

Her eyes widen.

A gasp is ripped out of her.

Her jaw falls to the desk.

She re-reads the note.

She looks to me with wide eyes.

She looks back at the note.

She looks to me again.

And then finally, she swivels right around to Nate who grins at her, knowing exactly what's just passed between us.

She shoots to her feet with her hand over her stomach and her other covering her mouth. "Shit," she calls out. "Mr. Miller, I'm going to throw up."

He gasps and looks absolutely horrified. "Ugh. Get out of here. I don't want to clean that up." With that, Brooke runs out of the room and Mr. Miller looks to me. "Tora, go with her. Make sure she's alright."

I nod and race out of the room after Brooke and find her waiting for me in the hallway with a grin. "Works every time," she laughs.

I can't help but laugh as well as we walk down the hallway and out to the parking lot. We head straight for her car and climb in before peeling out of the parking lot and heading for my place where we can be alone.

“So,” she finally says. “You’re sleeping with the enemy?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I’m sorry. I really wanted to tell you but I didn’t know how, especially when I don’t even understand what’s happening myself.”

“What is happening?” she asks as she leans out her window to put in the code for the gate. “Shit, it’s not working,” she tells me.

“Oh. I changed it. 0306.”

She keys it in and the gate begins to open. “Why’d you change it?”

“To stop Nate from kidnapping me.”

“Didn’t work, did it?”

“Not even close,” I laugh before letting out a deep sigh. “I really like him,” I tell her. “I know it’s wrong and I shouldn’t feel like that about him, but over the last two weeks, he’s been a completely different person.”

“How do you mean?”

She pulls up out the front of my house and we get out before walking up the stairs to the front door. “He’s been sweet,” I say, hardly believing the words as they come out of my mouth. “He taught me to drive and was patient with me and then he rescued me from some loser who was coming on way too strong. He holds my hand and he cuddles me every night. He makes my lunch. He tells me I’m beautiful. He looks out for me. He-”

“Are we talking about the same guy?” she questions, cutting me off as we fall into my couch. “Nate Ryder? Nathaniel Ryder, king of the twats?”

“Yeah,” I laugh before looking up at her. “He really cares about me,” I tell her.

“Are you sure?” she questions. “He was with that girl on Friday night.”

“He had his arm around her,” I clarify. “But the second you left, he was making sure I was ok and offering to drive me home.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out to see a new text.

Nate – You ok? Let me know if you need me.

“See what I mean,” I say as I turn the phone around to show her the

screen.

“Shit,” she sighs as she reads over the text. “So, this is really happening.”

“No,” I sigh. “Maybe. Yes. Oh, I don’t know. He treated me like shit for five years. It’s not like I can just forget that.”

“Good,” she grunts. “I was worried about that for a bit.”

I roll my eyes before replying to Nate’s text to let him know I’m fine and at my place. Brooke’s silent for too long so I look back up at her with a grin. “Well, go on,” I say. “Ask away.”

“Oh, thank god,” she sighs with relief before letting it all come out like word vomit. “What was it like? Is it as good as they all say it is? Is he like, hard and fast or a slow and gentle kind of guy? Oh, oh,” she says with a wide grin. “Is it big?”

Rather than answer all her individual questions, I tell a recap of how it all happened, starting with the very first night at dinner where I threw up, though, I tell her it was food poisoning. I know I’m all about sharing right now, but that secret will be remaining my own for now.

I tell her how we fought in the hallway and how I had gotten the best of him the next morning. I tell her how he had snuck into my room that night and was gone in the morning. She even goes as far to put together the fact that I was in a foul mood that day and is proud that she pieced it together.

I tell her everything, right up to the talk we had in his car on Friday night and how he said he’s liked me since we were twelve.

“So, what happens now?” she questions.

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him since then, apart from this morning at my locker and all he was doing was making sure Josh was leaving.”

“And he actually wants to be with you, like, full on, boyfriend/girlfriend, lovey-dovey type of shit.”

“I think so,” I say.

She bites the inside of her cheek as she gets lost in thought. “I think you should go for it.”

I raise my brow at her. “And just forget about the past five years?”

“No. I mean, forgetting all that would be impossible, but I think if he works for it, you could learn to forgive him. I think you guys would actually be pretty good together,” she tells me. “He’d be intense, but a good intense.”

I think it over for a bit before falling back into the couch. “I don’t know,” I say. “There are a few things he needs to sort through first,” I tell her, thinking of how he couldn’t tell me why he treated me the way he did for the past few years. “After that... we’ll see.”

“Yeah, well,” she says with a sigh. “It’s about the same with me and Maxen. He claims he’s not a girlfriend kind of guy, yet he hasn’t left my side. He even introduced himself to my mom.”

“Shit,” I gasp with wide eyes. “How’d that go down?”

“Good,” she laughs. “I don’t know how he did it but he has mom eating out of his hand. She’s constantly asking me to invite him over.”

“Holy crap,” I laugh. “That’s funny.”

“I know,” she laughs as another text comes through, lighting up my phone on the coffee table. I lean forward and scoop it off the table before reading over the text.

Nate – I got your shit out of your locker. Bring Brooke back to my place.

I pull myself off the couch and pull Brooke up behind me. “Come on,” I tell her, “We’ve been summoned.”

“Huh?” she grunts as she grabs her things off the coffee table.

“Ditching party at Nate’s place.”

A grin sweeps across her face. “Hell yeah,” she says before ducking past the kitchen and grabbing a banana out of the fruit bowl.

We walk out and before we know it, we’re pulling up at Nate’s place to find not only his car but all the guys’ cars. We walk on in and she does her usual look around, still not used to being here.

I lead her straight through the house and to the den where I know they’ll all be and a moment later, I drop down into Nate’s lap while Brooke gets pulled down between Maxen and Jesse, which is where we spend the

rest of the day.

Chapter 20

The bell for our Friday lunch rings and I let out a sigh of relief as I pack up my things. I've been suffering through this class for an hour too long and all I want to do is dig into my lunch and possibly convince Nate to meet me in an empty classroom and screw my brains out.

I walk down towards the cafeteria with Bec rambling on about the first football game of the season tonight and groan as she demands my attendance so us four girls can ogle the football team as they run up and down the field. Though, for the first time since being at this school, I couldn't think of anything worse.

I mean, sitting up in the stands watching Josh being the star he pretends to be while Elle shakes her ass for attention, I mean, hard pass. I'd rather spend my afternoon sitting in the garage watching Nate work on his car and listening to whatever ridiculous jokes Jesse wants to throw my way.

I spy the bathroom coming up in the hallway and I look across to Bec. "I'm going to pee real quick," I tell her. "Can you grab me something to eat? I'm starving."

She rolls her eyes and smiles. The girls have gotten used to my new eating habits over the last few days though, whether or not they know the reason behind it is completely lost on me.

Bec continues down the hall towards the cafeteria as I duck into the bathroom. I quickly pee before washing my hands and tidying up my hair in the mirror. A second later, I step out of the bathroom with a grumbling stomach and make my way towards the cafeteria.

I'm just about there when a hand grasps my elbow and tugs me hard into the broom closet. I gasp at the suddenness of it before I'm slammed up against the wall with hands roaming over my body and someone's lips crushing down on mine.

At first, I assume it's Nate, but the smell is all wrong. The lips are wrong. The taste is wrong.

The lights are off, but it's not too dark to make out Josh standing before me. Though, even if I couldn't see him, it wouldn't take me long to realize whose hands are pulling at my shirt.

With his lips crushed on mine, I pull my hands up in between us and try to give him a hard shove. Josh moves back all of one step before coming back for more. It's enough to allow me to pull in a harsh breath but not enough to move out from around him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I yell as I continue to push him away.

With his size and strength, there's not a lot I can do, especially as he grabs my hands and slams me against the wall again. "Stop fucking pushing me away," he demands as he ducks his head down towards mine again.

His dirty lips are on mine again and I rip my head to the side. This can't be happening. I need to get out of here but I'm stuck. "Get off me," I yell.

Josh adjusts my hands so both my wrists are locked in just one of his as he slaps his other hand over my mouth. "Shut up," he demands as he grinds his erection into my stomach while also pinning me to the wall with his body. "You're fucking mine," he growls. "I'm just taking what you should have given up weeks ago."

He takes his hand off my mouth and grips my chin, forcing my face back to his. A moment later his lips are on mine and his hand is slipping up under my shirt. I bite down hard on his lip and he pulls back with anger in his eyes.

Josh grabs my boob and gives it a hand squeeze as he continues grinding himself against me. "Stop acting like you don't want it. Any girl in this school would be lucky to get this."

"Get off me," I demand as tears begin to pool in my eyes. "You're a fucking dirty pig."

Josh releases my hand and grabs my shoulders. He pulls me forward before slamming me against the wall once again. My head rebounds off it and makes my head spin as an instant headache sets deep within my skull.

He uses his body to keep me pinned as he makes quick work of undoing his jeans. He pulls his dick free and presses it into my stomach

again. The tears begin to spill as the feel of him against me makes me want to throw up.

I need to get out of here otherwise this is going to go somewhere I'll never be able to come back from.

Josh presses his lips to my neck and I do my best to turn my face as far away from him as possible. He reaches for my jeans and starts fiddling with the button and I realize this is it. I have to make my move.

I swallow back disgust as I reach down between us and grip his dick in my fist. He lets out an appreciative groan. "Hey, Josh?" I whisper into the darkened room as I ignore the tears on my cheeks. My hand slowly travels up the length of his dick before tightening at the base. "Remember when I told you I'll destroy you if you were to touch me?"

At that, his body stiffens and he pulls back slightly to look down at me, realizing I'm threatening to destroy him while his dick is in my hand. His whole body freezes as he watches me with fear, but I don't dare hesitate.

I use his dick to pull me off the wall before I let go and ram my knee up between his legs as hard as possible. He groans and doubles over as he clutches himself. He falls to the ground of the dirty broom closet and I take my opportunity to kick him as hard as possible in the ribs. "I told you I'd fucking destroy you," I yell down at him as I turn and hastily try to unlock the door.

As I scramble to get out, he calls after me. "You're going to fucking pay for that."

I slam the door behind me, not daring to look back. The tears come streaming down my face, fast and heavy, and I know I must look like a mess but I don't care. I just need to get away from him. I need to feel safe. I need Nate.

A million things rush through my mind but I don't make sense of any of them. I just keep running.

I slam into a hard body and it's then I realize I've come straight into the cafeteria. Nate grips my shoulders and is yelling something at me but I don't hear him, all I can hear is the sound of my pulse rapid in my ears.

He shakes me and I try to focus on him. I look at the sharp lines of

his jaw, his dark hair, his smoldering eyes. I take a breath and calm myself. “Tora? What happened?”

I swallow back and wipe the tears on the back of my arm, but they come straight back. Only then do I realize that every eye in the room is on me. Jesse, Max, Tyson, and Parker all hover around me forming some kind of protective barrier around us while Brooke runs from the opposite side of the cafeteria trying to get to me.

“Tora,” Nate demands. I turn back to him and realize he has been saying something again. “What happened? Why’s your shirt torn?”

The tears continue spilling and I try to focus everything him. “Tora,” he demands again.

“Josh,” I whisper. “He pulled me into the broom closet. He wouldn’t stop.”

Jesse curses as the boys start fidgeting on their feet, desperate to do something about it. Brooke gasps but all I can focus on is Nate. His eyes go dark as his jaw clenches. He starts looking me over from head to toe before he pulls me in hard against his chest. “Are you hurt?” he murmurs as he rubs his hand over the back of my head and down my back.

“I... I don’t know,” I admit as I smother my face into his chest. “He slammed me against the wall a few times. And he... he.”

“It’s ok,” he soothes as he continues rubbing his hand down my back. “You don’t need to tell me.” He pushes me back before pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Wait here with Brooke.”

“No,” I call out and fist my hands into his shirt. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I have to make this right,” he says with fire in his eyes. “He touched you.”

“Please,” I beg. “Just stay here.”

“She’s right, man,” Jesse says. “What are you going to do? You’ve already got too many strikes against your name. If you start another fight, you’re out of here.”

“Like I give a shit about that,” he roars. “He touched Tora. He’s

going to fucking pay.”

“I know,” Jesse yells back at him. “Believe me, I want to hand that guy his ass just as much as you do, but we have to be smart about this. Think it through.”

“Sorry, man,” he says, taking my hands from his shirt and stepping away. “That fucker is dead. Nobody touches my girl and gets away with it.” With that, he turns and stalks out of the cafeteria.

Within the blink of an eye, the boys are following right behind him and I’m racing out after them. I push through the boys and come right up beside Nate. He looks down at me and I wait for him to tell me to go, but he never does, instead, he takes my hand and brings it up to his lips. He gives it a kiss before looking up the hallway. “Which one?” he asks, referring to the three different broom closets in this long hallway.

I point it out and a fierce determination sets itself across Nate’s face. He storms towards the door with Jesse behind us, groaning about how this is a bad idea, and he’s right, but there’s no stopping Nate. Not this time.

Nate reaches the door and practically rips it off its hinges before darting in and pulling Josh out into the hallway. The shock has barely registered but when he sees Nate before him surrounded by the rest of the boys, his eyes widen in fear. He knows he’s fucked.

Nate rears back and Josh attempts to duck but he's too slow. Nate cracks his right fist across Josh’s jaw and a spray of blood comes spurting out of his mouth and splatters across the wall of the hallway.

Josh tries to charge him but Nate isn’t putting up with any of his shit and gets an uppercut to Josh’s stomach. It winds him and he gasps for breath. “What’s the matter?” Nate grunts. “You don’t like it when someone touches you against your fucking will?”

“Fuck you,” Josh grunts as he tries to right himself.

People start crowding around but Nate doesn’t seem to care. He’s not nearly done with him. “Nate,” I call out, not wanting him to get in trouble. “That’s enough.”

He starts to pull back but then Josh looks across at me. “You fucking wanted it, you little whore. You always have.”

I see red and launch myself towards him at the same time Nate does. Jesse catches me around the waist and holds on, making me kick and claw at his arm, desperate to get my hands on Josh.

Nate doesn't have the same issue and freely beats him to a pulp against the wall. Other students try to break through Maxen, Tyson, and Parker to pull Nate off him, but they have no chance of getting past that wall of muscle.

I hear the sound of Nate's fists beating into Josh's flesh and I watch each one, hoping they hurt as bad as it looks. Nate rears back one more time and cracks Josh right across the face.

His eyes roll back and before I know it, Josh is knocked out cold and falling in a crumpled heap on the floor; only then does Jesse let me go.

Nate turns around to check on me and I race forward into his arms. "Are you ok?" he asks, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Yeah," I murmur into his chest, using his shirt to dry the tears off my face. I pull back and reach for his hands to find his knuckles red and bloodied. "Thank you," I say as I gently run my thumb over his sore hands, hoping I can somehow take his pain away.

Nate pulls me back in and wraps his arms right around me. "If he ever touches you again, the fucker will be getting a one-way ticket to hell."

I don't doubt that one bit. I look up at him and he brings his lips down on me.

Brooke's gasp has me reluctantly pulling away as I watch her dart into the broom closet and come out a second later with a digital camera. "He filmed it all," she says in disgust.

"What?" Nate grunts as he reaches forward and snatches the camera out of her hands.

As he goes to start searching through the camera, a large body pushes through the students. "How did I know this would have something to do with you?" Principal Watkins demands as he looks at Nate. "All of you, my office now," he roars before looking down at Josh then across to a few of the guys on the football team. "You two, get him to the nurse."

With that, he turns and stalks away.

With the show over, the students break away, and I follow Nate with a cringe as we walk towards Principal Watkin's office. "Fuck, this is not going to be good," Jesse murmurs beside me.

"It'll be fine," I say. "It's not like he did it for fun."

"I don't know," he cringes.

We fall into silence and I watch as Nate plays on the camera before bringing up the video. Rage takes over him once again and I don't doubt that he'd turn around and have another go at Josh. Nate goes to delete it when I take the camera out of his hands. "Don't," I rush out.

His eyebrows furrow as he looks at me in alarm. "Why the hell not?"

"I told him I was going to destroy him and this right here is my evidence," I explain. "Josh is going down. He'll never touch another woman again."

Nate nods. "You're sure?" he questions. "In order to do that you'll have to show people exactly what he did to you."

"I know," I say, more determined than ever.

"Ok," he says as he places his hand on my lower back. "It's your decision. Whatever you want, I'm here for you."

I nod my head as we walk into Watkins' office. He's already seated behind his desk and dialing a number on his phone. He scowls at each of us and I follow Nate's lead as he takes a seat.

"Mr. Ryder," he says into the phone. "This is Principal Watkins from Broken Hill High. I'm sorry to have to call you like this, however, there's a situation involving your sons. I'm going to have to ask you to come down here." He pauses for a moment before starting up again. "Yes, thank you. I'll see you shortly."

Principal Watkins hangs up the phone before looking up at us all. He scans the line of boys before him before his eyes narrow on me. I've never been in his office for something bad before and there's no doubt he's trying to work out what the hell I have to do with a fight between the two boys.

His eyes go back to Nate which is when they narrow further. "That's your third strike, Nathaniel," he tells him.

Nate just nods his head, accepting what is, but not me. I won't stand for him getting in trouble like that, especially when he was defending me. I fly to my feet. "No," I demand. "How can you just say that when you haven't even asked a single question? You have no idea what that was even about."

His eyes widen as he looks to me before he fans his arm out. "Well then," he says with a bad attitude. "Why don't you shed a little light on the situation? I'd love to know what could have possibly happened to make what Nathaniel did alright."

I raise my eyebrow at his bad attitude and force myself not to go over there and give him a piece of my own mind. Instead, I bring up the footage and hand the camera across. "Here," I tell him. "That's your star quarterback sexually assaulting me in the broom closet not ten minutes ago."

Watkins hits play on the video and his bad attitude instantly turns into shock, followed by disgust, and then finally, horror. "Are you alright?" he questions when he looks up at me.

"Yes," I say. "Physically, but I'm sure what he did is going to flash through my mind every time I see a football player or walk past a broom closet." He nods and places the camera down on his desk. "Just so you know, I plan on taking him down. I'm going to hit him hard with everything I've got and I hope to god that this school can back me up. I also want it pointed out that I'm a minor and I did not give consent for him to touch me or film me in this way."

"By all means, Tora," he says. "Broken Hill High will stand by you. We do not condone any form of violence towards our students or staff and we will do whatever we can to make you feel safe within the walls of this school. You have my word, Tora, action will be taken," he says before turning towards Nate. "As for you, I understand why you did it, hell, I probably would have done it too, but we cannot condone violence." Nate nods and Watkins goes on. "Why don't you all sit out in the hallway. Your father will be here soon and we can discuss an appropriate punishment."

"What about punishment for Josh?" Jesse cuts in.

"An investigation will be launched but I believe expulsion and criminal charges would be appropriate," he says before looking back at me. "Now, as you mentioned, you are a minor, so you understand that I will have

to put a call into your parents?”

I press my lips together hating that a call like that is only going to worry them but I have no choice in the matter. “Yes, I know,” I tell him. “They’re in Australia at the moment with my sick Nanna. It’s night time and they’re going through a hard time so can you be... sensitive about it?”

“Of course,” he says. “Why don’t you visit one of our nurses while we wait on Mr. Ryder. Make sure you’re ok.”

I nod my head as we get up and head out into the hallway. Nate takes my hand and I sit down beside him, not bothering to visit the nurse.

Ten minutes later, Cade Ryder walks in with a scowl on his face. He looks straight at Nate, not knowing what the hell is going on but naturally, assuming the worst. “Don’t move,” he tells him before walking straight past and into Watkins’ office before closing the door behind him.

Chapter 21

I walk through the door behind Cade with Nate beside me and Jesse behind. We walk in silence until we get to the kitchen when Cade turns around and looks at each of us. “Right,” he starts, focusing on Nate. “You’re home tonight. No parties. No get-togethers. No hanging out with the boys. All night, it’s either the den, the dining room, or your bedroom. Got it?”

Nate nods his head as his father turns to Jesse. “That goes for you, too.”

“What?” Jesse grunt. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You could have pulled him away, instead you let him beat the shit out of that kid.”

“But he-”

“I don’t want to hear how he deserved it. I know he deserved it, and quite frankly, I think he deserved more,” Cade argues. “But, if this were the real world, Nate would have been arrested on assault and you and your friends would have been taken along with him as accessories. I refuse to allow you idiots to end up in prison, so until you learn that, you’re spending your Friday nights and weekends with me.”

“But-”

Cade ignores his son as he turns to me. “Tora, I’m really sorry this happened to you and you’ve become a victim in all this, but I don’t want you going out tonight either. I don’t want to risk that dickhead going out to finish what he started, especially without Nate and Jesse there to look out for you.”

“That’s fine,” I tell him. “I wasn’t planning on going out tonight anyway.”

“Alright, then,” he says as he squeezes my shoulder and walks out of the kitchen. “I’ll be in my study if you need me,” he calls over his shoulder before disappearing into the house.

“Come on,” Nate says a moment later as he drags me into the den with Jesse following behind. We drop down into the couch and Jesse flicks

on a movie.

As we sit in silence, I can't help but ignore the screen as my mind takes me back to my afternoon. I mean, I haven't had such a shitty day in so long. The three of us got sent home once Nate's dad was finished with Principal Watkins, which actually took quite a while as the police were called and charges were filed.

Cade took complete charge of the situation and all that did was prove to me how often he's had to do stuff like that for the boys. He was absolutely great and managed to get Nate off with only a week suspension, as after all, he did beat the shit out of a student before knocking him out based solely on my word.

Everything was going good until Josh woke up and entered the office. Then it was both Cade and Nate being held back by the staff and Jesse, showing me once and for all where Nate gets his temper from. Though, as promised, an investigation was launched and Josh has been placed on suspension until the investigation is complete. He's also been dropped from the football team until further notice, though, once a thorough investigation is done, I'm sure he'll be out of the school altogether.

My parents were called and since then have been blowing up my phone but I haven't really had a chance to call them back until now, and I find myself putting it off. I don't want to talk about it again but I know I need to put them out of their misery.

The memories of being inside that broom closet with Josh haven't stopped circling my mind and all it does is make me feel sick and dirty.

I push myself up to my feet and Nate grabs my hand. "Where are you going?" he grunts as he tugs on my hand, stopping me.

"I want to shower. I feel kind of dirty after having him all over me."

"Oh," he says, looking broken that I feel that way.

He lets go of my hand and I walk out of the room but when I see both Nate and Jesse following behind, I turn and watch them over my shoulder. "You guys know that I'm capable of showering by myself, right?"

"Mhmm," Jesse says as Nate silently continues following. I mean, surely, they aren't planning on helping me shower, right?

I get up the stairs and push through the door of my room only to have both the boys follow me in. Jesse stops and drops down onto my bed while Nate follows me into the bathroom. He doesn't shut the door but he doesn't need to, Jesse won't be able to see anything, as long as he stays on my bed.

I walk straight up to the mirror as Nate leans against the sink, watching me. I get myself undressed and can't help but notice all the bruising over my body from where Josh had gripped me. I try not to focus on it, as all it does is make me remember every tiny little detail of how he touched me.

I turn away and lean into the shower to turn on the taps. After waiting a few moments, it's warm enough to step into and I instantly let the hot water cascade over my body. Nate's arms circle my waist and I gasp as I hadn't heard him undressing. I turn in his arms and rest my head against his chest as he holds me.

This right here is exactly what I've been needing all afternoon. Just me and Nate alone.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs as he runs his thumb back and forth over my hip. "I should have put a stop to his plans when I first heard about it."

My brows pull down as I look up at him and search his eyes. "Don't do that," I tell him.

"Do what?"

"Blame yourself," I explain. "Once the idea was in his head, he wasn't going to stop. I could sense that from him. I was the stupid one here. I was the one walking down the hall alone when I knew that was a possibility. I wasn't thinking and that's on me."

He shakes his head, refusing to listen to my reasoning, but I get the feeling this is just one of those things where we have to agree to disagree. "I hate that he touched you," he tells me.

"I know," I sigh. "I hate it too, but I'm happy it's over and now I'll never have to see him again."

Nate's whole body tenses. "He better hope he never sees you again," he mutters darkly.

I pull myself back into him and he instantly relaxes. "Come on," I say

after a moment of standing in his arms. “I want to wash him off me and forget this day ever happened.”

“Alright,” he says as he releases me. I reach over and grab the soap before cleaning myself and then going the extra mile to wash my hair as well. A moment later, I feel squeaky clean and fall back into Nate’s arms. “Better?” he questions.

I smile up at him and press my lips to his. “A million times better,” I tell him before kissing him again. “What are the chances that Jesse isn’t on my bed anymore?”

“He’s still there,” he groans as he pushes me against the cool tiles of the shower and kisses the sensitive skin of my neck. “He’s feeling protective of you so he won’t be going anywhere for a while.”

“Damn,” I grunt. “So, you’re telling me that I can’t take advantage of you right now?”

“Fuck no,” he groans low in his throat as he presses himself up against me and grabs my ass. In one quick movement, he lifts me and my legs wrap around him before he slides straight into me and makes me forget the hell of a day I’ve just had.

We step out of the shower once he’s thoroughly made me feel alive and he grabs a towel to wrap around me. I dry myself up as best I can before walking out into my room and heading straight for the closet.

I pull the door closed behind me to allow myself some privacy to get dressed and a few minutes later, I come out to find not only Jesse on my bed but Nate as well. I roll my eyes at my protection detail and grab my phone out of my bag before falling into Nate’s arms.

I cringe as I pull up my mom’s number and hit call. I can only imagine what she’s thinking right now. She answers on the first ring. “Tora?” she rushes out. “Are you alright? What the hell happened?”

“Hey, mom,” I murmur down the phone. “I’m fine.”

“I got a call from Principal Watkins saying you were sexually assaulted by a football player,” she says anxiously.

“Yeah, I was, but it’s ok. I’m ok.”

“Shit, honey. I’m coming home,” she says on a sob.

“No, mom,” I say. “Really. It’s alright. I’m not hurt. Nate took care of him and then Cade handled the rest.”

“How do you mean he handled the rest? I want charges filed against that kid. Has he been charged?”

“Yes,” I say. “The police were called and both them and the school are investigating. He had videoed it all as well and we found the camera, so we have the proof. He’ll most likely be expelled and charged which means no more football for him, so he can kiss his dreams of playing college football away.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom cries. “I’m so sorry you’ve gone through all this. I promise you, the second I can, I’ll be on the first flight home.”

“Mom, really. Don’t worry about me. Josh has been dealt with and I have Nate and Jesse looking out for me. I’m ok, I was a little shaken up and then Nate beat the crap out of him. I’m all good. I promise.”

“Are you sure, honey?”

“Yes, mom. I’m sure,” I tell her. “You need to be there for Nanna. Don’t worry about me.”

“You know I’m your mother, right?” she says with relief in her voice. “It’s impossible not to worry about you.”

“I know,” I smile. “But I’m safe. I’m going to stay in and have a movie night with the boys because they’ve been grounded.”

“Grounded?” she grunts. “What for?”

“Using their fists instead of their words.”

“Oh, dear,” she groans. “You know I don’t condone violence, but just this one time. I mean, did he get him good?”

“Oh, yeah,” I laugh. “Knocked him out cold.” Nate’s arm tightens around me as the boys listening in on my conversation. I smile up at him and he presses a kiss to my forehead.

“Jesus,” she sighs. “Listen, honey. Your daddy is bugging me for some answers so I better go. Be safe, ok? I want to hear from you first thing in the morning and every hour after that until I get home. Got it?”

“Alright,” I laugh. “You got yourself a deal.”

“Love you, baby.”

“Love you too, mom.”

With that, she hangs up the call and I put my phone down beside me. I snuggle deeper into Nate’s side as I watch the movie Jesse put on. I don’t think I even watch for ten minutes before I fall asleep.

All I know is that when Nate is waking me up, the room is suddenly covered in darkness and I’d managed to sleep the whole afternoon away. “Come on, babe,” Nate says. “We’re going out.”

I rub my eyes as I sit up in bed. “Huh?” I grunt. “What are you talking about?”

“Jesse wants to go out and pay a visit to your favorite cheerleader.”

“What?” I grunt again, still foggy from sleep. “We can’t go out. You guys are stuck here until your dad decides he can trust you again.”

“That’s never going to happen,” he smirks down at me. “Come on, get yourself ready. Jesse has been dying to get out of here. I made him wait so you could get more sleep.”

With a groan, I push myself up out of bed and trudge over to my closet. I’d bet all the money in the world that we’re going to a party but I don’t bother getting all dressed up. Instead, I grab a pair of boots and a jacket before throwing my hair up into a messy bun.

I walk out a moment later and Nate takes my hand before leading me down to Jesse’s room. “Bout time,” he groans as we appear in the doorway. “I’ve been waiting hours for you to wake up.”

I roll my eyes as I watch him walk over to his bedroom window and slide it open. “What are you doing?” I grunt as I watch him climb through the window.

He looks back through at me. “What does it look like I’m doing?” he says. “Now, hurry that fine ass up. We have a party to crash.”

“You’re kidding right?” I question. “I’m not escaping out the second story window.”

“That’s fine,” Jesse grunts. “You can stay behind.”

My mouth pops open. I don't want to stay behind. I narrow my eyes on him. "You wouldn't leave me behind," I challenge.

"Want to make a bet?" he says with a sparkle in his eye.

I let out a huff and storm towards the window. "Damn it," I groan. "What's wrong with using the door?" I ask as I take hold of the window sill and look out. Nate comes up behind me and helps me up onto the window ledge while Jesse grabs hold of me on the other side. My heart races. "I swear, if either one of you let me fall off this roof, I'm going to kill you."

"You seriously think I'd let you fall?" Nate questions behind me.

I turn around and narrow my eyes on him. "I don't know," I say. "There's a long list of things that I never thought you'd do to me."

"Really?" he questions. "You want to take a stab at me while you're hanging off the roof?"

"There's no better time than the present," I say with a grin.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head before climbing out the window behind me. The boys expertly make their way along the roof and it's clear they've done this a few times before. Jesse climbs over to the edge before jumping down to the ground and I watch in horror as he indicates for me to follow. "You're shitting me," I groan.

"Hurry up," he whisper yells so we're not heard from inside.

Nate continues to hold onto me as I make my way over to the edge. "He'll catch you," Nate promises.

"I know," I groan as I peek over the edge.

I scoot right to the edge and let my legs dangle off before clenching my eyes and letting myself fall. I resist screaming out and a second later, I drop straight into Jesse's arms. "That wasn't so bad now, was it?" he says with a cocky grin.

"Put me down," I groan.

He laughs to himself and a moment later he helps to steady me on my feet as Nate drops to the ground beside me. "Come on," he says, pulling me into him and walking up the long driveway.

"No car?" I question.

“Nope,” Jesse grunts. “Dad will hear it. Maxen will meet us down the street.”

I nod my head and come to terms with the sudden bit of exercise. “Why are we going out anyway?” I ask as Nate pulls out a packet of cigarettes. “Ugh, really?”

He looks down at me as I take the cigarette from his fingers and go to bring it to my lips. He snatches it right back and furrows his eyebrows. “What do you think you’re doing?” he grunts.

“Smoking,” I tell him.

He narrows his eyes on me. “No way. No girl of mine is going to be smoking.”

“And why the hell not?” I question with a grin.

He grabs me and pulls me hard against him before kissing me deeply. “You taste too good.”

“Oh, I see,” I say, loving how this has worked out so easily in my favor. “So, I have to put up with you tasting like cigarettes, but you don’t?”

He pulls back slightly to look down at me. “What are you saying? You want me to quit?”

“I’d love for you to quit, but that’s not my call. If you want to stop, then that’s great but I’m not going to force you to,” I explain. “All I’m saying is don’t expect me to enjoy kissing you when you taste like that.”

He presses his lips together as he watches me. “Fine,” he groans before sliding the cigarette back into the packet and tucking it into his pocket. “But for the record,” he says as we continue walking behind Jesse. “I can read your body like a map, so I know you enjoy kissing me no matter what I taste like.”

I force myself not to grin as I look up at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He rolls his eyes as a smirk takes over his handsome face. “Liar.”

“Would you two quit trying to make babies and hurry up?” Jesse calls. “I want to fuck shit up.”

“What’s he talking about?” I ask.

“You’ll see,” he tells me.

We take off after Jesse and the boys manage to somehow get me over the gate before we find Maxen waiting around the corner. We all pile in and the music is turned right up.

Jesse is giddy and excited and can hardly sit still while Nate looks as cool as a cucumber. Maxen pulls up at the party ten minutes later and kills the engine before turning around to look at me. “You should know,” he says. “Everyone is talking about what happened today.”

I nod my head as Nate watches me with concern etched all over his face. “I had figured as much,” I tell them, letting them know I’m good.

“Alright,” Jesse says. “Then let’s get this party started.”

Chapter 22

We walk through the door of the party and I instantly look around. I haven't been here before and I'm completely lost, though, Nate takes my hand and leads me through the house as easy as if it were his own.

As usual, the second people realize that the Ryder brothers are here, drinks are thrust into their hands and people are swarming from everywhere to say hello. Girls begin throwing themselves at Jesse while others narrow their eyes on me, wondering what makes me so special to have stolen Nate's attention.

The crowd seems to part for them as they make their way through the house which I'm thankful for as I search out a familiar face.

"Is Brooke here?" I call out to Maxen who walks in front of us.

"Yeah," he says. "She was with Bec and Courtney when I left."

"Thanks," I say as I release Nate's hand and go to search them out, only he latches onto my elbow and pulls me back into him.

"You're not going anywhere. They can come to you," he tells me. "My dad was right. If Josh is here, he might want to finish what he started and I'm not about to let that happen, so you're not leaving my side the whole night."

"Seriously?" I question. "I'll only be gone for two seconds."

He scoffs at me. "I'm sure that's what you said right before Josh attacked you."

I narrow my eyes on him and cross my arms over my chest, seeing that he means every last word. "So, I'm your prisoner tonight?"

A smirk rips across his lips as he pulls me in and brings his lips down into my neck. "I didn't know you were into roleplay, but I'm sure Jesse has some handcuffs somewhere."

"Ugh," I groan as I push him back. "You're such an idiot."

"You love it," he laughs before a serious look crosses his face. "Just,

please. Ok? Don't go anywhere."

I watch him for a moment and the look in his eyes has me melting. "Fine," I groan.

A beautiful smile takes over his lips and I can't resist pushing up onto my tippy toes to kiss it. As he pulls away, he looks over the top of my head at Maxen. "Can you find the girls?"

Max nods and a moment later, he takes off.

"Come on," Jesse says as he takes my hand and drags me towards the drinks table. "It's time to get fucked up."

"I don't want to get fucked up," I laugh.

"Tough shit," he says. "You're going to want a drink in your hand to celebrate what I've got planned for tonight."

My eyes narrow on his. "What are you going to do?"

"Tsk, tsk," he says, holding up a finger. "I'm not about to ruin the surprise."

I roll my eyes and go with it. I pour myself an orange juice with vodka and lemonade and put a tiny little straw inside my cup before making my way back over to Nate.

Some girl is busily trying to throw herself at him while he studiously ignores her and watches me. I laugh at the sight and practically bowl her out of the way as I come up next to him. The girl huffs and walks away before finding one of the guys on the football team to rub herself against.

Nate puts his arm around me and gets lost in a conversation with Parker when Brooke, Courtney, and Bec show up. They squeal as they see me and I dash forward. Brooke instantly throws her arms around me and pulls me in tight. "Are you ok?" she questions as she sways me from side to side.

"I'm fine," I tell her.

"Everyone's talking about it," she warns me. "There are so many different versions of the story going around and a few of them aren't very nice."

"I bet," I say. "The truth will come out sooner or later. Everyone will

see what kind of guy Josh really is, and if they don't, I'm sure Nate and Jess will beat the crap out of them until they do."

"Oh, geez," she laughs. "What I wouldn't do to have my own Nate and Jess." I roll my eyes but the two of us can't help but look back at the boys to find both their eyes on us. "It must be intense being their special little girl," she murmurs.

"Don't get me wrong," I grin. "It certainly has its advantages."

"You're such a whore," she laughs.

I can't help but laugh as well as we fall down into some chairs and get lost in our conversation. As the party goes on, Jesse keeps me well hydrated with Vodka and soon enough, all the boys spot someone across the room.

Jesse rubs his hands together with a grin and looks to me. "It's show time."

"Huh?" I grunt as Nate pulls me to my feet. "What are you talking about?"

Jesse indicates across the room with a nod of his head and I turn to search out whatever he's looking for. Elle stands around a bunch of cheerleaders and my brows pull down in confusion. "What do you want with Elle? She backed off."

"She may have backed off," Nate says. "But it was her who put the idea in Josh's head. She's just as guilty as he is and needs to be punished."

"But... What are you going to do?" I question as we start making our way over there.

Jesse grins back at me and the excitement he's been holding on to all night is right at the forefront and he looks as though he could explode. "I've got a secret to spill."

"Oh, shit," Brooke laughs as the curiosity hits me like a freight train. "Is this *the* secret?"

"Sure is," he laughs.

I find myself hurrying up, desperate to not miss a single word. I feel kind of bad for Elle. She doesn't know what's coming her way. After all, she

backed off, but the boys are right, she gave Josh the idea and it's because of that I was assaulted. She needs to pay for what she's done. And I mean, what kind of harm could one secret really do?

As we get closer and the group of cheerleaders become our obvious target, people start crowding around. Elle's back is turned on us and her best friend, Phoenix, points us out. She turns around and grins with delight as she watches us approach, but that grin quickly disappears when she sees the twisted excitement on Jesse's face.

Her head starts shaking and she goes to back up but there are too many people behind her. She has nowhere to go. "No," she says to Jesse as we reach her. Her eyes flick to me before finding Nate's and then going back to Jesse. "I stopped. I didn't do it."

"I warned you," he tells her. "I thought I made it pretty damn clear that if something were to happen to Tora, that I was coming after you."

She shakes her head again. "But... I didn't do it. I told him to stop," she says with wide eyes as Nate's hand finds the small of my back. "Jesse, please. You'll ruin me."

Jesse's eyes darken as he steps forward into her. "It will ruin you the same way it would have ruined Tora had he raped her?"

Her eyes flick back to me. "He didn't though."

"No, he didn't because she got away. It was his intention though, and that's because you put the idea in his head." She continues shaking her head and looking around for some kind of way out of this. "You need to pay for what you've done," Jesse tells her.

Her face goes ghostly white as she looks around at her friends. "What's going on, Elle?" Phoenix asks her with narrowed eyes.

"Nothing. Nothing," she says, frantic.

Phoenix turns on Jesse and raises her head to him. "What's this all about?" she questions.

Jesse grins down at her and winks, making her cheeks flush and I laugh knowing how easily these guys can play these girls. "Your head cheerleader messed with one of ours, and now we're going to mess with her," Jesse explains.

“And how do you plan do doing that?” she says, acting as though her group of cheer skanks are untouchable.

“Oh, I’m not going to do anything,” he tells her. “You are.”

“What?” she grunts.

“All of you are,” he says. “Every single one of you is going to turn your backs on her.”

“I don’t think so,” she scoffs.

“But I do,” he says. “You see, it’s just how things work around here. You’ll turn your backs the second you find out that Parker fucked her.”

Elle gasps and looks as though she’s about to be sick while Phoenix’s eyebrows pull down. “What’s wrong with that? Half the girls on the team have already screwed Parker.”

Jesse grins and looks across to Elle before turning back to Phoenix with a wicked excitement. I see it in his eyes, this is Jesse Ryder going in for the kill. “But did they do it while Tyson was already buried balls deep in her ass?”

Holy shit.

Both Brooke and I gasp at the same time as the cheerleaders. Nate laughs while Jesse looks proud as fuck. Max double’s over, trying to control himself as Parker and Tyson high five over the top of him.

Elle looks as though her whole world has come apart, especially when all the other cheerleaders gape at her. Jesse watches her through calculated eyes. “Like I said, Elle. You mess with one of us and we will mess with you.” He then turns to Phoenix. “Let that be a lesson,” he warns.

She nods her head in understanding and with that, we turn and walk away.

As we leave, I can’t help but look back over my shoulder and watch how the cheerleaders turn on Elle, just as Jesse had predicted. Elle walks away with her head down and tears in her eyes as the cheerleaders look to Phoenix. And just like that, Broken Hill High has a new head cheerleader.

“That was incredible,” Brooke laughs. “Though you know as soon as she gets over this, she’s coming for you. She’s going to blame this all on

you.”

“I know,” I sigh. “Let her. I’ll be ready. Though, I feel kind of bad for her,” I admit.

Jesse turns around and looks down at my empty drink. “That just means you haven’t drunk enough of those,” he tells me before he steals my cup and thrusts it towards some awkward bystander and demands he refills it. Naturally, the guy scurries away and barges through the line, desperate to get the cup filled in record time.

Jesse’s excitement is contagious, especially when he climbs up onto the table and screams out for the real party to get started. The music is turned up, drinks are passed around, and bodies begin grinding.

I stay by Nate’s side the whole night and at four in the morning both he and Jesse are laughing as they try to haul me back up onto the roof of their house. We creep along the tiles while I try my best not to fall and finally get back to Jesse’s window. Though I must say, I feel a lot braver doing this with alcohol going through my veins than I did when we were leaving.

Jesse slides the window open, gives us a cheesy salute, and literally dives through before landing with a thud on the other side. I slap a hand over my mouth to stop the giggling and watch as Jesse groans and gets to his feet.

He returns to help me through the window and I scurry out of his room as he walks to the bathroom while pulling his junk out of his pants. The next thing I hear is the sound of him peeing and groaning in relief while I hurry down the hall.

I get into my room and pull off my jacket and boots and when I turn around, Nate is right there, crashing into me.

A desperate need is slammed through us as his lips come down hard on mine. We scramble to get one another undressed. I pull his shirt over his head before flinging it across the room. It crashes into a photo frame on the wall and the frame tumbles down to the ground. I work on his belt as he grows tired of the buttons on my shirt and just tears them open.

His pants go and I wrap my fingers around him as my own get pulled down my legs. He grabs a condom and instantly slides it on before lifting me and walking us over to the bed.

He falls back onto the bed with me in his arms and a moment later, I lower myself down on top of him before riding him all night long.

When the sun finally peeks in through the window, we both crash down into the pillows and I fall into a deep sleep in the arms of the man who I'm quickly falling in love with.

Chapter 23

The sound of my phone blaring to life has me bolting upright in bed. What the hell? My head aches and I know instantly that I probably shouldn't have drunk quite so much last night. I reach over Nate and grab my phone off the bedside table and find a text from Brooke.

Brooke – MAX ASKED ME OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A grin rips across my face as I pull the sheet more firmly up under my arms.

Tora – Holy crap!! Wow! Congratulations!!!!

Brooke – I know! I can hardly believe it. Where'd you stay last night?

Tora – I'm at Nate's. We're all still in bed. Come over later and tell me all about it.

Brooke – You're on!!!! Can't wait!

I throw my phone back down beside me and squish myself into Nate's side. His arms come around me before they start trailing up and down my back. I smile into my pillow, loving the feel of his skin on mine. My eyes close and I relax into him, but he has other plans for our morning.

Within the blink of an eye, he grabs my waist and roll us until I lay on top of his chest. "Stop it," I laugh before a yawn is ripped out of me.

"Geez," he laughs. "You're really not a morning person."

"I am," I argue. "I just didn't get enough sleep because some idiot kept me up all night."

"Hey," he defends. "That was all you, babe. I was just along for the ride."

I can't help but grin as I nuzzle my face into his strong chest. He's right, I screwed him until I physically couldn't screw anymore. It was great, though I'm a bit sore now.

He runs his fingers up and down the length of my back and I close

my eyes as I listen to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. “You know,” I murmur into the quiet room. “You called me your girl yesterday... twice.”

“Aren’t you?” he questions. “If you were any other girl, I’d deny it, but not with you. No matter how much you hate it, you’re my girl and you’re just going to have to get used to it. No refunds or exchanges.”

I sit up and look down at him as his hands come to a stop on my waist. “Are you sure?”

He doesn’t reply just keeps watching me until he rolls us back over and hovers above me. My legs wrap around him as he props himself up on his elbows and looks down at me. “It’s about time I let you in on the secret,” he tells me.

“What do you mean?” I ask as I search his dark, dreamy eyes.

“I don’t know if you remember it, but when we were twelve, you came over here with your parents and it was a really hot day so we were swimming,” he says with a cringe.

The memory hits me like a lightning bolt. That was the day it all started. “I remember,” I tell him. “That was the day you first said you hated me.”

He nods and hangs his head as he takes a deep breath. “Yeah,” he says, full of regret. “Do you remember what happened before that?”

I think back but come up with nothing. All I remember was running around the pool with the boys, having a great time and then all of a sudden, things changed. I shake my head as my hands roam up his arms.

Nate lets out another breath before looking back at me. “We were playing some stupid game in the pool and you’d stopped to get a drink. I came over and you smiled at me and it blew me away. I’d had a crush on you all summer and I thought maybe you were liking me the same way, but instead, you wanted to tell me how my best friend Simon had asked you on a date to the movies. That was my first heartbreak,” he tells me.

I gasp as I search his eyes and hold onto him a little tighter. “I didn’t know,” I tell him as my eyes pool with tears.

“I know,” he says as he wipes the tears away. “I was angry at you and I wanted to hurt you like you’d hurt me. So, I was mean, I told you nasty

things and you went home crying. You didn't talk to me for days."

"Then you went on your date with Simon and I hated it. It made me furious and I didn't know how to handle it. I was a dick to Simon and I refused to be his friend, which is why I lost my shit when you tried to use Parker against me," he explains. "I was a dick to you. Every single day, I would do something to hurt you and eventually, you started to hate me."

"I did," I whisper.

"I know," he says. "I hated that you hated me but it made me feel better. I never got over you and eventually, you refused to talk to me at all. Once I got over the hurt, I'd realized that I'd fucked up and lost you as a friend, but you were done with me. There wasn't anything I could do that would have made what I did alright."

I watch him, unsure of how to feel or what to say. "I—"

"No," he says, cutting me off. "There's so much more. You need to hear it all."

I nod my head and wait as he takes another slow breath. "By the time we were thirteen, I missed you so bad. I hated that you weren't in my life anymore and I was still so caught up on you that Jesse had worked it out," he says. "I needed to be around you but I'd already done such atrocious things that I didn't stand a chance at making it up to you. So, I became a twisted version of a bully."

My eyebrows furrow in confusion. "How do you mean 'twisted'?" I ask.

A smirk plays on his lips as he lowers his face and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. "Everything I ever did to you, was for a reason."

"Explain," I say slowly.

"The things I did to you were always to benefit you or give you something that you wanted. I just went about it in a twisted way because it was the only time I could get a reaction out of you."

I look up at him in disbelief. "You cut my hair," I remind him with a scoff. "I don't see how that benefitted me."

"Really?" he questions. "For two months before that, I sat behind you

in health class and listened to you telling Brooke how you wanted to change your hairstyle but didn't have the guts to do it. So, I cut your hair and you had no choice but to go and get it done. You still wear your hair the same way now."

My mouth drops open. "Are you shitting me?" I gasp as I recall the way I would whine to Brooke about it. I cried when he cut my hair but he's right, mom sent me to the hairdresser and I got it cut in the style I wanted. I haven't changed it since. "What about when I was on a date with Todd Hyde and you told him I was a stage five clinger?"

"You weren't on a date with Todd. All his friends were there watching. They had bets if he would finger you by the end of the night. It was all a game. I told him you were a clinger and he piss bolted out of there. I didn't want you to get used like that," he says. "I promise you, babe, everything I did always had a reason behind it."

"Phoenix's birthday two years ago?" I question.

"You didn't like Phoenix and you wanted to go to a concert instead. I gave you a reason to leave."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

His eyes stare into mine as he nods his head. "Yeah," he says. "I've been in love with you since we were twelve years old, Tora. Every fucking day. I couldn't talk to you, not like this, but I needed you in my life. You'll never understand just how much I hated myself for putting you through all that. I wish I was stronger when I was a kid and I wish I had the balls to tell you the truth, but I didn't. I was a pussy and instead of being honest with you, I tore you down."

I wrap my arms further around him and pull him down into me as his words play over and over again in my mind. I mean, I could have sworn he just said he's been in love with me since we were twelve. "It's ok," I tell him as I hold on for dear life, feeling completely overwhelmed by his admissions. "I get it now."

"It will never be ok," he tells me. "What I did..." he trails off as he shakes his head in disgust. "I swear, Tora. I will make it up to you."

"I don't want you too," I tell him. "You already have. You were right

before when you called me your girl.” He pulls back to look down at me. “Over the past few weeks, you’ve wormed your way inside and I don’t know when it happened, but at some point, I forgave you.”

He searches my eyes, but I’m not done yet. “I want to be with you and not just in the ‘get naked together’ kind of way, but truly be with you. I want to share my life with you because over the past few weeks I’ve learned that you’re not the asshole I always thought you were. You’re so much more than that and I’m starting to fall hard for that guy.”

He brings his lips down and kisses me as he runs his fingers through my hair. “Are you sure?” he questions.

“Yeah,” I say. “I mean, as long as there are no more secrets between us.”

He cringes and I pull back. “Then you should probably know that I was the one who told your mom you weren’t eating at fourteen.”

“What?” I gasp as I look at him with betrayal.

“I’m sorry,” he tells me. “It’s just, I didn’t like seeing you like that and I couldn’t help you without making it worse. I had to. I couldn’t let you go on like that.”

I nod my head as he leans his forehead against mine. “Anything else you need to admit to?” I question.

He grins down at me. “On your car keys you have that diamond keyring that says ‘Trixie’,” he says.

“Yeah?” I question, wondering what the keyring dedicated to my dead dog has anything to do with him.

“That was from me.”

“What?” I shriek with wide eyes. “No way. Mom and dad got me that after she died.”

“No,” he says with a smirk as he slowly shakes his head.

“But it was on my bed.”

“I know,” he grins. “I put it there, but I swear, you will never understand the satisfaction I feel every time I see it dangling from your keychain.”

I stare up at him in wonder. “You’re unbelievable.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I think I like you a whole lot more now,” I tell him. “But there’s only one issue.”

“What’s that?”

“When you were not dumping Ashley, you told her you don’t do the whole girlfriend/boyfriend thing,” I remind him. “I’m not like Ashley. I’m not the kind of girl who will be there just for sex.”

“I don’t want you just for sex,” he tells me. “I’ve never done the girlfriend thing because none of them were you.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. “What are you saying, Nathaniel?” I tease.

“Are you seriously going to make me say it?” he questions.

“After everything you’ve put me through... yes. I’m going to make you say it.”

He lets out a sigh and runs his knuckles down the side of my face. “I’m saying I want to be with you, Tora. I want you in my life every damn day. I want to love you and I want to fight with you. I want to kiss you any time I want and I want you to hate on me every time I screw up. I want to creep in through your bedroom window and have your dad chase me out the door with his gun when I get caught. I want to stand in the store, staring at all the tampons trying to figure out which fucking one to choose. I want it all, Tora, but only with you.”

I grin up at him and press my lips to his. “Fine,” I groan. “But only because you won’t shut up about it.”

He shakes his head. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Oh, yeah,” I laugh as I push up to kiss him again.

An hour later, I hear the sound of Brooke attempting to break down the front door. “Tora?” she calls out. “Nate? Jesse? You guys better not still be in bed.”

I groan as I look up at Nate. “Do you think she’ll go away?” he asks me.

“Nope,” I laugh. “So, unless you want her to barge on in here and get

an eyeful of your ass, then we better get dressed.”

“I do have a nice ass,” he grins.

“I know, but she’s one of the only girls in the school who hasn’t seen it, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Fine,” he says as he pulls me up out of bed. “But the second she’s gone. You’re all mine.”

“Deal,” I laugh as he throws me over his shoulder and heads for the shower. A second later, the tap is turned on freezing cold and he throws me in, screaming for mercy.

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it, please consider leaving a review.

www.amazon.com/review/create-review/B07N1C7DMJ

For more information on The Broken Hill High Series, find me on Facebook

—

www.facebook.com/SheridanAnneAuthor/

Author Biography

Sheridan Anne is a wife to a smart-ass husband, Mumma to two beautiful girls, twin sister, daughter, and friend who lives in beautiful Australia. Sheridan writes both romance and young adult fantasy books on a variety of topics and can be found on most days with her family or writing during nap time. To find out more or to simply say 'hello', connect with her on Facebook - www.facebook.com/SheridanAnneAuthor/

Other Books by Sheridan Anne

Teen & Young Adult - Paranormal Romance

DESTRUCT – The Guard Trilogy (Book 1)

www.amazon.com/dp/B07GPHDDMM

DECIMATE – The Guard Trilogy (Book 2)

www.amazon.com/dp/B07GVFMM6T

DOMINATE – The Guard Trilogy (Book 3)

www.amazon.com/dp/B07H2HFNMN

An Angel's Trust – Warriors of Light (Book 1) - Coming 2019

An Angel's Soul – Warriors of Light (Book 2) – Coming 2019

An Angel's Destiny – Warriors of Light (Book 3) – Coming 2019

Young Adult / New Adult - Romance

Broken Hill High – Broken Hill High Series (Book 1)

www.amazon.com/dp/B07N1C7DMJ

Broken Hill Halo - Broken Hill High Series (Book 2)

Broken Hill Hurt - Broken Hill High Series (Book 3)

Broken Hill Hearts - Broken Hill High Series (Book 4)

Romance

Miller – Kings of Denver (Book 1) www.amazon.com/dp/B078LCCRWJ

Jaxon – Kings of Denver (Book 2) www.amazon.com/dp/B078MWD25M

Xander – Kings of Denver (Book 3) www.amazon.com/dp/B07928QNNF

Tank – Kings of Denver (Book 4) www.amazon.com/dp/B079Z49YFD

Logan – Denver Royalty (Book 1) www.amazon.com/dp/B07F7YZVGB

Carter – Denver Royalty (Book 2) www.amazon.com/dp/B07FMZVCJH

Sean – Denver Royalty (Book 3) www.amazon.com/dp/B07FZLLDCH

Cole – Rebels Advocate (Book 1) www.amazon.com/dp/B07K5XQXWZ

Caden – Rebels Advocate (Book 2) www.amazon.com/dp/B07KB36XXS

Luke – Rebels Advocate (Book 3) www.amazon.com/dp/B07KKJB8CP

Jace – Rebels Advocate (Book 4) www.amazon.com/dp/B07KSGQLJY