

## Chapter 3

1994

My feet pounded the pavement harder with each step as I channeled my frustration out on the running path. Angrily, I swiped at the tears that escaped my eyes, eager to keep them from rolling down my cheeks. Taking deep shaky breaths, I attempted to concentrate on the way the blacktop felt beneath my feet. I repressed my hurt, and let my anger fuel me, picking up speed as I rounded the corner. Did he think I was stupid? Did he really think I couldn't see that Donnie was making excuses for him? And, he *told* Donnie?? This was unbelievable. How could this really be happening? One minute, I was disagreeing about exercise with my oldest friend, and the next minute I was falling in love with him. And now? Well, that was obvious- either he didn't want us together, or he was deflecting because we *couldn't* be together. Neither gave me much comfort.

My thoughts were cut short when I rounded another corner and ran smack dab into another runner. I had been so caught up in my own head, I was paying no attention whatsoever to my surroundings. Not the smartest thing to do, in the way of safety. "Oof!" I exclaimed, the impact knocking away what little air was left in my lungs. "I'm so sorry!" I panted. Strong arms came up, long fingers reaching out to steady me. My eyes were about level to his neck, and I looked up as I took a step back. Surprise filtered my voice. "Joe?"

Wary confusion touched his features, as he struggled to see if he knew me, or if I was just another fan. Recognition struck suddenly, and his face lit up when he realized it was me. "Raven?" I was in his arms before I could utter a word, and I patted his back as he squeezed me hard. I couldn't help but smile. Joe always seemed to have that enthusiastic energy whenever I saw him, and today was no different. He held me back at arms length, looking me over. "I can't believe it. You look... you're... how ah you?" He finally managed.

I felt myself blush slightly, and let out something between a chuckle and a giggle. I had seen Joe tongue-tied numerous times before, but never over me. I told myself he just wasn't expecting to- literally- run into me. I smiled up at him. "Good, I'm good." And in that moment, I was.

Unfortunately, I had never been a "pretty" crier, and my red nose and upper lip, and puffy eyes were tell-tale signs as Joe observed me. His energy did not diminish, but a frown etched his features, and concern laced his voice. "What is it? What's the mattah?"

I looked down, embarrassed. "Nothing. I..." I shook my head. "I'm fine."

We were quiet for a moment, then the twinkle returned to Joe's eyes, a slow smile spread across his face. "Liah," he stated matter-of-factly in his thick Boston accent. I returned his smile genuinely, and he finally dropped his hands from my arms to cross his own in front of him. "What are you doin' aftah your run? Ya wanna grab some lunch?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I brushed a stray hair out of my face, and made a mental note to run straight back to the house and shower. "What time are you thinking?" I had no idea what time it was now, but I was guessing it was later than I originally thought, if it was nearing lunchtime.

"11:30? I could pick you up."

"Okay, that sounds good."

"Ya staying at Danny's?"

I felt a small pang in my chest at the sound of his name, and hoped it didn't show on my face. I would have to get over that. "Yep," I said what I hoped to be casually. If anything showed, Joe either didn't notice, or didn't let on.

"Okay, see ya soon then." He was poised to move again, and I took a step to do the same.

"Great, see you." I waved, and we both continued on in opposite directions. I jogged until I thought we were out of sight of one another, then hurriedly ditched the running path, heading towards Dan and Betty's house. It wasn't until I was letting myself in the front door that I realized my thoughts had been of Joe and not Danny. I shook my head and smiled.