

Chapter 1

I looked out the window and as far behind me as I could, between every break and wisp of cloud I could find, desperate to hold onto Florida, the sight of land, of water. A tear slid out the corner of my eye and I squinted as I wiped it away, passing it off as the glare of the sun.

One of the flight attendants announced we could now use our electronic devices and I pulled my iPod out of my carry-on. I slid my bright pink Gumy earbuds in and hit shuffle. Heather Nova's voice filled my ears with sadness and my mind with not-so-distant memories. I smirked as an image of Danny flashed across my mind.

I began to drift, thinking of nothing in particular, quick to push aside any emotion that threatened to linger. Janet Jackson's "That's The Way Love Goes" came on next and as I gazed out at the blue sky, I allowed myself to think of the first time I was aware of being alone with Danny. The clouds took on a solid shape as they changed into the small pile of pillows stacked against the headboard of the twin size bed...

1994:

"So what do you want to do today?" I flopped down on the edge of the bed, bouncing slightly, and fluffed my hair as I looked at my reflection in the mirror over the dresser across from me. I groaned when I saw Danny exit the bathroom wearing his red gym shorts, white t-shirt in his hand. "No," I said adamantly, jerking the shirt from his grasp. "Not today."

He jerked the shirt back from me. "I always work out before anything else; trying to stay healthy, ya know?"

I couldn't help but to look him over as he worked the shirt over his head, pulling and straightening it out over his already taut abs. I swallowed and looked away, not letting myself think any more of it. "You *are* healthy. Skipping one day won't kill you. One day." I stood in front of him and held up my forefinger to illustrate my point.

He grabbed at my finger, and I pulled away, but not before he got it. I pulled harder. "Come with me," he responded.

I made a face. "You know I hate the gym." He let go of my finger and sat where I had previously, pulling his sneakers on and lacing them. I wasn't focused on it, but my mind still noticed the way the muscles in his legs and arms flexed as he moved. I leaned back against the dresser, facing him.

"So we'll run."

I slumped my shoulders.

"It would be good for you. Everyone should exercise."

"Oh, I exercise. I just find other ways to do it."

He gave me a look that clearly said he didn't believe me. "Like what?"

"Dancing, for one." I reached over to turn on his radio. "Great cardio," I added pointedly, so he would see I at least knew something of what I was talking about. Janet Jackson's voice and the sultry music of 'That's the Way Love Goes' came through the speakers. "Oh, my God, this is my favorite." I automatically began moving my hips, my lithe body fluid as I let the music speak to me. I closed my eyes and sang softly, rocking my body gently to the beat, forgetting I was standing directly in front of Danny.

I heard him clear his throat, and I opened my eyes. I was un-prepared for, and momentarily distracted by, the expression on his face, so close to mine. I promptly and awkwardly tripped over his feet, and fumbled to keep my balance. Danny quickly reached out to help steady me; but that only succeeded in my falling towards him, knocking us both over onto the bed. My breath rushed out of me, and it took me a second of nearly laying completely on top of him before I could gain composure. My brain took notice of the way his body felt beneath mine, and I quickly pushed against his chest, raising slightly off of him, and tried, rather unsuccessfully, to untangle my feet and legs from his. I felt the bed begin to shake, and I stopped, looking down to see Danny laughing. "What?" I nearly yelled.

"Are you always this graceful?" He asked when he could manage a breath.

"Shut up," I said, smacking his chest, embarrassed. "I can't help it that your feet practically stick out in the middle of the floor!"

"Oh, now you're blaming me?" he raised his eyebrows as if in surprise.

"Yes," I couldn't help giggling.

"Yeah?" he was still holding onto me, and he quickly flipped us so he was on top of me. I squealed as we mock-wrestled, then started laughing. Wait... was I flirting with Danny?

"Besides," he went on, "you know what they say about guys with big feet."

"Danny!" My eyes went wide with shock. We had never really spoken like that with one another before. Was he flirting with me, too?

"I was going to say we wear big socks." His voice took on a certain teasing tone. "Where was *your* mind?"

I couldn't answer. We had played like this dozens of times, but I had never been so aware of him before; so aware of being *alone* with him before. I could feel my heart fluttering in my chest, feel his body semi-heavy on mine, feel his breath on my face. I closed my eyes for a split second to try to pull myself together. Danny must have noticed, or felt something, too, because when I

opened them, his face was serious, and I could swear a fraction closer to mine. His lips parted slightly, as if he were about to say something, but no words came out. I saw him swallow, his adam's apple bobbing hard. The look in his eyes... my stomach did a huge somersault and I knew the second before it happened that it was going to.

Danny looked deep into my eyes a brief moment before leaning in, letting his weight fall on me slightly, and bringing his lips down on mine.

Oh, my God, this was amazing. His lips were so soft, and he tasted... well, he tasted like I would have thought he did, if I had ever let myself think about it. His lips moved gently at first, hesitantly; then gained confidence when I didn't pull away. He parted his lips, and I felt his tongue touch my lower lip, as if asking permission to enter. I granted his wish, and the instant our tongues met, I knew I would never belong to anyone else but him.

His hands loosened on my wrists where we had been wrestling, and slid slowly down my arms, freeing them to move. Instinctively, my hands went to the back of his head, my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer, and taking the kiss deeper. I heard him groan, then he shifted on top of me. I froze when I felt him against my thigh. Was that... holy shit! I would have gulped, but did not want to break the kiss. He was huge! After a split-second of shock, I felt my body react, and again instinctively, moved with him. My legs fell open, and his body fit perfectly between them. I was breathing heavier, and was a bit surprised to find that Danny was, as well. He was the first to pull his lips from mine, but only to move them down to my neck. My body shivered involuntarily when his warm breath hit the spots he made wet with his tongue. I heard myself moan, and felt myself relax, as my body seemed to automatically know what to do. I had made out with guys before, but... this was *Danny*. And never with anyone else had my body felt or reacted the way it did now. I never wanted these feelings to end.

I pressed myself tighter against him, and heard him mumble my name against my skin. I took a deep breath and let it out in a contented sigh, running my fingers through his hair. I closed my eyes and smiled, concentrating on the way his scruff felt against my neck, his lips a gentle contrast. He stopped, and raised himself up on his arms, in a push-up like position. My hands found their way down his biceps, caressing his already well-developed arms. He searched my face a moment, his breathing labored. Leaning up, I brought my lips to his neck and softly kissed the spot next to his collarbone that was exposed from his t-shirt. I worked my way up, mimicking what he had done to me, continuing up to his ear. I heard him suck in a loud breath when I ran my tongue along the outline of his ear, and I whispered his name.

He pulled me off of him in an instant. He was still above me, and I wasn't sure what to make of the sudden departure of his body, his warmth. Had I done something wrong? One look at my face, and his own softened. He sighed in frustration and leaned back on his knees, away from me further. "Raven... we can't do this."

I felt like I was about to cry. I swallowed hard, then pushed myself up onto my elbows. "What do you mean?" I asked.

He paused, obviously searching for the correct words. "It's not right," he finally said haltingly.

I felt myself grow angry then, as I thought about what he might mean. It was easy to stop the tears from coming after that. I got up on my knees, too, and asked a simple but stupid question. "Why?" I knew it was the age difference, but I didn't want to believe it, didn't want to think about it. Thinking about it would make it real. And it couldn't be real; what was real was the way I felt for Danny. And the way he seemingly felt for me.

"It's not right," he repeated, looking down.

"It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself," I retorted. He could hear the tension in my tone, and he looked up. We knelt in front of one another, and I refused to look away. I stared into his eyes hard as I said, "Because it sure as hell doesn't feel wrong."

He sighed and looked away again, this time out the window. "No, it doesn't," he answered quietly.

"So then what else matters?" I rose up to reach for him, one hand sliding around the back of his neck, the other pulling his face back to look at me. He met my gaze and said nothing, so I brought my lips up to his. They had barely touched, however, when he stopped me. Grasping my hands in his, he found my eyes again. I could tell he was forcing himself to do this, because the tone in his voice and the longing in his eyes were contradicting to his words. "We both know this isn't right." He paused, not wanting to continue. "We could both get into a lot of trouble with this."

And there it was. Skirting around the issue, making his point indirectly. He was right about that, though. And I would never do anything to hurt him.

I sighed reluctantly, but I had to agree. "I know." It was my turn to look away, following the path his eyes had taken outside just a moment before. I would not handle this like a child and prove the point even more. After all, it wasn't like we would stop hanging out together. Our families had been friends for as long as I could remember, seeing one another whenever my family was in town; that wouldn't just go away. Speaking of, I would be leaving again in a couple of days. I decided to make the best of it, and not let things get awkward. I pulled away from Danny, and climbed off the bed. "So... are we still going running?" I asked with a smile.

Danny chuckled and stood up, shaking his head in disbelief. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I knew it wasn't necessarily bad. "Sure, why not."

"Let me just go and change," I turned to leave, but Danny grabbed my wrist and pulled me around to him, embracing me in a fierce hug. I let his arms engulf me, and leaned into him, feeling tears threaten to spill once more. He lay his cheek on the top of my head and said softly, "Why do you have to be so young?"

I had to pull away. My heart was beginning to hurt in a way I hadn't known before and I didn't like it. I playfully pushed him, "Why do you have to be so old?" I teased.

He smiled, thankful for the banter. "24 is not old!"

"Ha! You're practically ancient! And 15 isn't *that* young," I left his bedroom before he could say anything more, and went down the hall to the guest bedroom to change.