

## Chapter 7

1994

*Danny*

The smell of garlic, onion, and tomatoes assaulted my nostrils as soon as I stepped through the door, and I knew mom had made her homemade lasagna. My stomach growling in anticipation, and Donnie practically drooling behind me, we shut the door and made our way into the dining area. I heard Raven's laughter emanating from the kitchen, followed by her voice issuing a playful warning of "No, no... don't you dare!", a small shriek, and more laughter. I smiled as I greeted my mom with a hug and kiss on the cheek, and Donnie did the same. I hadn't made mention of Donnie joining me, but mom wasn't the least bit surprised. I wasn't worried about there being enough food- mom always cooked extra, and when Raven's family was in town, it was enough to feed a small army. "Need any help, mom?"

"Sure, honey, would you mind taking the garlic bread out of the oven? It should be about done now."

"No problem," I grinned, as I moved towards the kitchen, anxious to see Raven.

I stopped short in the doorway, my grin quickly turning into a stony expression. Raven and Joe stood side by side at the counter next to the sink, cutting vegetables and tossing them into a large bowl for salad. They were giggling- both of them- and a lot too close for my comfort. They were oblivious to my non-entrance, and while I only stood there a second, it was a second too long. I thought of turning around and leaving before they noticed me, but Donnie began nudging me from behind, and I had no choice but to continue over the threshold.

Donnie stepped in front of me and stood centered behind Joe and Raven, placing each of his hands on one of their shoulders. "Hey, guys, how's it goin'?"

I knew he was trying to give me a moment, and as pissed as I was earlier, I was grateful now. I took a deep breath and moved to the stove, slipping the oven mitts on over my hands.

"Hey, man," I heard Joe greet Donnie cheerily. I discretely flipped him off through the padded fabric. "Hi, D!" Raven turned and gave Donnie a hug. Her shirt lifted with her raised arms, and I saw a generous glimpse of skin beneath her ribs. Joe's eyes traced up and down her body before he quickly looked back to his dinner task.

"Hey, Danny," she said casually when her eyes peered at me over Donnie's shoulder. I busied myself with the bread in the oven as an excuse to turn away. "Hey."

There was a brief instance of awkward silence before Donnie spoke again. "Anything I

can help with?"

"I don't think so," this coming from Raven. I turned around in time to see Joe pluck a cherry tomato from the bowl, and Raven's tone become one of mock annoyance.

"Unless you can keep Joe from eating all the salad before dinner." She swatted his hand away.

"I can't help it! I'm a growing boy, I need my vegetables!" I thought I saw a look pass between Joe and Raven, but it was so fleeting, I could have been mistaken.

"Whatever, out!" she laughed, pointing to the doorway.

"Damn, she's gotten bossy!" Donnie joked, steering Joe out of the kitchen. "We're going, we're going!"

Raven's laughter faded as I took the oven mitts off and crossed my arms in front of my chest, leaning against the counter. She was standing directly across from me now, and she turned silently, eyes meeting mine for only a second before she resumed her position chopping vegetables.

I pushed myself away from the counter and took the spot next to her where Joe previously stood. "Want some help?"

She didn't look at me. "I'm almost done."

"C'mon, I promise I won't eat any," I cajoled.

"Sure," her voice was hesitant, but she passed me a bell pepper anyway.

I tried to sound casual. "So, what'd you do today?"

She glanced sideways up at me before answering. "I ran into Joe this morning, and we had lunch together." She shrugged.

"Is that all?" I couldn't help it.

She let out an exaggerated breath. "What is it you're really asking me, Danny?"

"I'm just asking about your day," the words sounded artificial even to my ears.

"Fine," she continued slicing mushrooms. "We went to the park, then came back here and hung out before helping with dinner."

So many questions, thoughts, and scenarios invaded my mind, but I remained silent. I knew I had reacted badly that morning; but these feelings had come on so suddenly, and so strong that I didn't know *how* to react. I wanted to explain all of this to her, but

with a houseful of both our families and friends, it could be difficult.

"Look, Raven... I..." I was interrupted by Joe popping his head back into the kitchen, his hands placed firmly on either side of the doorway.

"Betty wants to know if yah almost done," he addressed Raven. "We're stahvin' out herah."

Raven rolled her eyes. "You're always starving. Be right out." Joe winked at her, then was gone. She hastily tossed in the mushrooms and bell pepper, grabbed the tongs from the counter and carried the bowl into the dining room without another word.

*Damn.* I quickly placed the bread into the basket that was set out next to the stove, and made my way after her. The room had filled up considerably, as dad had inserted the leaf and expanded the table. Brett and Melissa were joining us, so there were ten of us total. I set the bread in the center of the table next to the salad; mom had made two lasagnas, and one was placed at the head and end of the table. Everyone was taking their seats- Dad was to be at the head of the table, with Raven's dad across from him; my mom sat next to my dad, then myself, Melissa, and Joe; Raven's mom sat next to her dad, across from Joe, then Raven, Donnie, and Brett. It was not the ideal seating situation; I would have much rather sat next to Raven, but at least I wasn't directly next to Joe. I scolded myself for being so petty, and pulled out my chair.

After saying grace, everyone began talking and passing the food. I heard bits and pieces of about three different conversations- talk of school, work, Raven and her parents heading back home the next afternoon. It struck me then that I didn't want her to leave. There wasn't much I could do about that, but I was determined to fix this rift between us before she went. We all conversed easily, and for a while it felt like everything was the same as before. It wasn't until the food went around the table a second time that Melissa decided to play detective.

"Raven, since when don't you like garlic bread?" she asked.

Raven looked up, puzzled. "Who said I didn't like garlic bread?"

"Well, you haven't eaten any yet- usually you eat more bread than anything."

I pretended to be thoroughly engrossed in my plate, but watched Raven from my peripheral. She shrugged. "I just didn't feel like having any."

Brett piped in, "You got a hot date tonight or somethin'?" he finished off with a wink.

Raven rolled her eyes in response, "Oh my gosh! Yes. Some guy I ran into while jogging at the park today." Her voice was sarcastic, but my head shot up at her words. I peered down the table at Joe. He remained quiet, but smirked down at his plate. *What the fuck?* My heart pounded. Was she serious? I had spent all day with scenarios of Joe

and Raven in my head, but until that point, I don't think I actually believed it. I had a hard enough time wrapping my head around the fact that I had fallen for her in an instant of bad judgement. Maybe she wasn't into me, after all. Maybe it was just her teenage hormones in the heat of the moment- God knows I got caught up, myself. Could I really have misread her that badly?

I could see Donnie glance at me, and I returned it before digging into my lasagna again.

"Wait, didn't you spend the day with Joe?" Melissa again. I shot her a look, which she didn't see. Why couldn't she shut up already?

"What does that have to do with my date tonight?" Raven played along.

"Well, I couldn't help but notice that Joe hasn't had any garlic bread, either."

I glared at my food. Everyone else looked at Joe.

"Neither have I," my mom spoke up. "Now, quit reading into things and leave these two alone."

The rest of dinner went on without incident. Joe and Raven continued to sneak glances at one another, but I don't think it was noticeable to anyone except myself and Donnie. Melissa asked Raven how her dancing was going, and Raven responded by telling her about her dance team at school, and the current song they were working on. "There is one part I can't seem to get right, though. It's driving me crazy."

"Raven, don't be silly, you're a wonderful dancer," Barbara enthused.

"Thanks, mom; but it still bugs me. I want it to be perfect."

"Maybe you can show it to me after dinner. I might be able to help you figure it out," Melissa suggested.

"That'd be great, thanks!"

After the table was cleared and the dishwasher loaded, everyone dispersed into different areas of the house, letting our food settle before dessert. I knew Raven and Melissa had shut themselves in her guest bedroom to work on her dance, so I didn't really care what Joe was doing at that point. I wandered down the hall to my own guest room, hearing the beats of "Tootsie Roll" coming from behind Raven's door as I passed. An image of her hips swaying in front of me shot through my mind from the day before, and I closed my eyes to erase it, groaning to myself. I crossed over the threshold and shut my door a little harder than necessary before flopping down onto my bed. Maybe a nap was what I needed to clear my head. I lay motionless with my arm across my eyes

and concentrated on my breathing as I allowed myself to drift into slumber.

I awoke to a light knocking on my door, and Donnie's head peeking in. "Hey, man," he started softly, "Raven and Melissa are about to show her dance to everybody, I didn't know if you wanted to come out or not."

I raised my arm just enough to peer at him through slits in my eyes. "Is Joe still here?"

He simply nodded once. I let out a heavy sigh, debating for all of ten seconds before making up my mind. I was up and off the bed in one motion, heading for the door. To my surprise, Donnie stepped in and closed the door softly behind him. I stared at him expectantly.

"What's going on with you, Puff?" concern laced his voice as he used my childhood nickname. I knew then he was serious, and I needed to be serious with him.

"I honestly don't know, dude," I raked a hand through my hair, then smoothed it back down. "I hadn't seen her in a few months, and all of a sudden, here she was, and things were just... different. I don't know how to explain it."

"You never do anything half-assed, so I know better than to ask if it's more than physical," Donnie sighed. "Your attitude says it all, anyway," he threw in with a small smirk.

I smirked back. "Yeah... not having my finest moments today."

"So what're ya gonna do?"

"What? Nothing. There's nothing I can do, except try to apologize before she goes. I don't want her visit to end like that, ya know?"

Again, Donnie simply nodded. Then, "You sure you wanna come downstairs?"

Now it was my turn to nod. Regardless of what was- or wasn't- going on between her and Joe, I knew it wouldn't go much further. She was fifteen, after all. Neither Joe nor Raven was that stupid. And he wouldn't take advantage of her, anyway. This whole thing had me thinking irrationally, and I was glad to get myself in check.

I followed Donnie downstairs to the living room, where everyone was chattering and finding a seat for the 'show'. Raven and Melissa stood near the fireplace, the portable stereo set atop the mantle. They were talking quietly, but I heard Raven mumble, "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"Seriously? You look *hot*, don't you want Joe to see you?" Melissa teased.

Raven smacked her arm. "Shut up!"

"Whatever," Melissa smiled.

Raven's eyes locked with mine as I reached the center of the room and sat on the sofa next to Donnie. Joe sat on the love seat next to her mom, and Raven and I both glanced at him, then back at each other. I wished I knew what she was thinking, but her expression was conveniently neutral. I tried to convey through my eyes how sorry I was. I thought I saw her mask slip, but it was back in place so quickly, I couldn't tell for sure.

"Okay, everybody," Melissa stood in the center of the room and clapped her hands together. "Raven showed me her dance, and it's *awesome*, so now we're gonna show you."

Raven rolled her eyes, her favorite way to diffuse her embarrassment. "It's not the whole dance, just what we've learned so far," she amended.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Melissa waved Raven into starting position, both of them facing the fireplace. Raven pressed play on the cd, then took her spot next to Melissa, their heads down, feet apart, arms at their sides.

"The butterfly, uh-uh, that's old! Let me see the Tootsie Roll!" The music started and they used their arms to 'push' their heads from one side to the other, before jumping to face the audience. They whipped their heads from side-to-side again, in time with their hips. "To the left, to the left! To the right, to the right!" They did some elaborate slide movement, which I guessed was the part Raven had been having trouble with. Then came the dips. I thought Donnie's eyes were going to bug out of his head, and knew his thoughts must have been similar to mine: *They actually let teenagers dance like this, at a Catholic school?* It wasn't racy by any means, but it was definitely suggestive. It wasn't lost on me that her 'slides' had positioned her directly in front of Joe, and my gaze shot over to him. He was eyeing her up and down, and not even trying to hide it. My earlier calm began to fly out the window when I saw Raven's deep brown eyes meet Joe's smoldering blue ones.

And just like that, the show was over. It couldn't have lasted more than a minute. There was a break in the music, and Raven jumped to turn off the disc. Everyone clapped, praise was delivered, and Melissa gave Raven a hug. "See, that wasn't so bad! I knew you could get that slide-step!"

Raven laughed, her cheeks flush. "Thank you for helping."

Mom headed towards the kitchen to set out dessert, and we all followed. Raven excused herself, and I saw her make her way down the hallway to the restroom. I ducked out of the dining room after a moment and stepped after her.

I had to talk to her. I knew I would probably see her tomorrow before she left, but I couldn't wait that long. I had to get her alone before Joe did. I was now convinced that if

there wasn't something going on between the two of them, there soon would be; and I had to come clean to her first. If there was a chance she did feel something for me, I had to let her know I felt the same. How could she make an informed decision if she didn't have all of the information?

I stood in the hallway across from the bathroom door and waited. Raven was looking down when she opened the door and didn't see me, flipping the switch off and plunging the hallway into darkness. The only source of light was coming from the dining room several feet away at the end of the hall, and we were in complete shadow. She looked up and saw me just as Brett turned the corner, and I nearly lost my chance. Before he could see us, I pulled her next to me into the darkened room behind us and quietly shut the door.