

## Chapter 1

I've had this conversation so many times over the last two weeks that I think I'm getting into a flow state.

"It's '*no*,' Elliott."

I raise my hand to sling a can of Coke over my shoulder, aiming for the little tuft of golden hair sticking innocently out of the top of Alex's head.

"What do you mean?"

Maybe I'm angry at him for this. Actually, I *am* angry at him for this, which is probably why, halfway through the throw, I put a spin on it like it's a fastball.

The can shoots over his head like a rocket, bouncing off the window with a *BANG!* that echoes before it falls to the floor and explodes.

A shrill voice shrieks from downstairs: "ARE YOU TWO THROWING BASEBALLS AT THE WINDOW AGAIN?"

I throw a thumb toward the door.

"If you tell her it was you, I'll buy you pizza every day after school for the next week."

He pops another piece into his mouth, turning toward the door.

"IT WAS ME, AND I BROKE THE NIGHTSTAND TOO. SORRY!"

"ALEXANDER, IF YOU WEREN'T FRESHLY OUT OF A COMA I WOULD *PUT* YOU IN ONE!"

I turn to Alex, raising an eyebrow.

"Dude, your sister is *weird*."

Alex shrugs, pulling both legs up onto the comforter. He's sporting a pair of pink oversized pants with an appropriately oversized bowl of pretzels sitting next to him, barely tilted

enough to not be spilling everywhere. He looks up at me slowly with a passive, almost empty expression, popping one into his mouth.

“I think you need to let this go,” he says, chewing pensively. “...I’m done. I mean it.”

I’m at my wits’ end. I’ve tried *everything*. Money, tutoring, a girlfriend: nothing works. I fall into his beanbag chair, bringing my hands to my head. “You can’t be *done*,” I say, covering my face with my hands. “Dude, you’re the *only person* who can’t say that.”

He picks up the bowl and sets it on his nightstand. Then he raises both hands and makes an exploding motion. “I am finished! Poof! No more!” A few pieces of pretzel fly into my face.

“...Oops,” he says.

I let my head fall against my right shoulder, staring blankly at the door. If there is one part of Alex’s room that retains any shred of his former personality, it’s this door. The same yellow, diamond-shaped OUT PLAYING BASEBALL sign shouts at me in sans-serif; a few medals still dangle from a couple of Command Strip hooks. But besides that, all that’s left of his incredible legacy, one that once made every sophomore in town give up baseball entirely, are the remnants of shattered trophies scattered across the floor from last week’s breakdown. If I squint my eyes at the sign and dissolve my peripheral vision, I can almost pretend that everything’s normal.

Almost.

I lean my head to the side, letting my hair fall over my eyes as I set my most intimidating stare.

“Alex,” I say.

He gives a weary glance. “Don’t look at me like that.”

I let my head fall back against the chair, staring up at the ceiling. I close my eyes for just long enough to hold off the fury.

“Alex.”

He chews, blinking slowly. “What, Elliott.”

“You...” I pause. “You’ve got to do it.” I push myself up from the chair, walking toward him. “Alex, you’ve got to do it. You’ve *got* to.”

I hate to beg him, to look so desperate, but I *am*. I *am* desperate, and if he just understood that—if he could just open his mind back to the idea of beginning again instead of letting our dream die here in this dirty bedroom—it wouldn’t have to be over. We could still *try*.

But that’s the problem, isn’t it. He doesn’t want to try anymore.

Alex crosses his arms, staring at me with the same empty eyes I used to see right before a pitch. I’ve seen those eyes a thousand times over a thousand practices and games. Except now, instead of inspiring courage, they suck every last atom of energy out of me.

“Come *on*, Alex!” I say, voice louder than I want it to be. “You can’t be... a freakin’ *quitter!*”

I think that pushed him, finally made him break, because a bolt of anger strikes in his irises, his face contorting into a sneer as he throws his legs down, dangling them over the edge of the comforter. The bowl of pretzels knocks over and tumbles to the floor as he reaches down, yanking up his left pant leg from the hem. He juts his right index finger at the leg underneath. “How am I supposed to play baseball,” he growls, “...if my leg looks like *this*.”

I don’t want to look at it. Because if I look at it, I’ll have to acknowledge its existence; I’ll have to fully and unabashedly admit that this happened to him, that this happened to *us*, our future, our team. But I have to.

It's the first time he's shown it to me on purpose, though I've seen it before, back when he was in the hospital, hooked up to the breathing machine. For two months, I visited him daily; watched as his body slowly healed, brain quiet from the medically induced coma.

Back then I felt guilty about it, looking at his damaged body without being able to know whether he wanted me to or not. Hell, most of the time I avoided looking at it entirely, avoided even looking at *him*, at the sheets over his body. Because if it were me, I would have been ashamed, too.

But if that was difficult back then, this is unbearable. Because now I have to look at it with his eyes on me, with his *awareness* of my reaction. And I can't hide the pained face I know I'm making as I suck in a small breath, flicking my eyes to his left leg. The flesh there is pale and discolored, though the muscles under his skin are still lightly defined from thousands of hours of strenuous training and tireless effort. His limbs are strong, reliable; his body a vessel he trained solely for this one, single purpose. Looking at it used to be inspiring; the image of perseverance. But now, under the four black straps wrapped tightly around his leg, between the black metal bar running vertically from the top strap down to the ankle, is a scar-ridden, discolored, atrophied leg, which doesn't look anything like Alex's leg and in fact *can't* be Alex's leg because if it *is* Alex's leg then we can never play baseball again and that just can't be true.

There's no sound between us as he swallows hard, dropping the pant leg to hide the shame in it. Pulling his good leg to his chest, he turns to the window, resting an arm on his knee. His voice is so quiet that when he speaks I'm not sure if it's real or if I'm just imagining it.

"I already told you, Elliott..." The pause between his words makes my stomach twist up in knots. "...*I can't play baseball with you anymore.*"

The words are defeated, petering out into nothing. The atmosphere stings with a painful quiet. I look away, focusing on a broken piece of trophy on the floor. Then I pull myself out of the chair and take one step toward my backpack. Another. And I get down in a squat, rifling through the papers.

“I knew you’d say that,” I say, finding the piece of paper and plucking it from my bag. I turn to face him, holding it in both hands as I walk toward him. When I reach the bed I get down on a knee, looking into his eyes with an intensity I’ve had to practice. He frowns, sticking out his tongue.

“Don’t *propose* to me, ew. Ask me out first, won’t ya—”

“Alex.”

He turns up his nose, looking at the ceiling, but the little change in his expression gives him away. I lower the paper, turning it 180 degrees so it’s facing him. “Alex.”

“No.” He crosses his arms, turning toward the wall. “No way.”

I take a breath, praying I have the strength to get through this without slugging him in the face. I turn the paper back around, clearing my throat.

“Dear Elliott Glover and Alex Reinhart,” I read. “Your essay was very moving to us—” I pause, pointing at my chest. “*I* wrote both, by the way, you’re welcome—”

“That we would like to officially invite you to our recruiting camp, beginning on the 19th of August, this year.”

As much as he tries to conceal it, Alex’s interest sparkles from his eyes as he looks at me, still mostly facing the wall.

“Do they... know about my...”

“In light of Alex Reinhart’s recent injury,” I continue, hearing Alex shift his weight to face me from the bed. “We would like to offer a modified evaluation, allowing him to only showcase his greatest strengths through three positions on the field best aligned with his abilities.”

Now Alex is facing me with his whole body. When I glance back at him, I can barely see the tremble in his shoulders, something so small that no one else would notice it. A small smile creeps up on my face.

“We sincerely look forward to seeing you both on the 19th. Best of luck. Sincerely, Placid Tigers.”

He’s quiet, and I look up at him with hope.

“Dude,” I say. “They’ll let you play on this team. *We* can play on this team. *Together*.”

For a moment of time that feels unfathomably and unbearably long, Alex says nothing. The birds outside chirp; the cicadas cry out into the setting August sun. Alex looks away from me into a middle distance, his frame encased in a backdrop that makes him almost disappear. I can see his expression as it flicks through several emotions: joy; surprise; frustration; anger; determination. But after a moment it settles. He turns back to me with something new in his eyes: hope.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Look, I really don’t know...”

“Too bad,” I say, pushing myself to my feet. “It starts tomorrow.” I extend a hand to him, and he looks up at me incredulously, mouth slightly ajar.

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not.”

He looks away. “But I haven’t even trained—”

“They know.”

He turns to face me with a childlike twinkle in his eyes.

His voice comes out small. “*Really?*”

I take a deep breath, giving a confident smile.

“Really really. Are you in?”

He puts a hand on the back of his neck nervously. “I mean I... uh...”

“Will you at least *try*?”

“Uh...” he pauses, looking at me uncertainly.

I raise a finger. “One last time. Then I’ll stop talking about it. Forever.”

He looks up into my face. “What if I fail.”

I shrug. “No more baseball ever again.”

He looks away, off to somewhere between the beginning and end of everything. Then he flicks his eyes to me, a small smile creeping up on his face.

“Okay,” he says, slapping my hand and pulling it into a tight shake. “One last time.”