**📖 *BREAKING PERFECT***

**Chapter 1 – Golden Boy**

At Westford College, **Nick Rivera** was everything.

He didn’t need to try. He didn’t need to prove. He just *was*. People knew his name before he introduced himself. Professors smiled a little too wide when he walked in late. Guys nodded in admiration or envy. Girls — well, most of them had stories.

Nick had the kind of life that looked designed for a movie. He was an **Ivy League legacy**, practically born into Westford's gold circle: private-school prep, old money, and connections that went deeper than blood. His dad had a science wing on campus named after him. His mom once guest lectured at Harvard. Success ran in his DNA.

But Nick? Nick preferred pools over politics.

He was a swimmer — nationally ranked — and a wide receiver the football team prayed would stay healthy enough for playoffs. He didn't care much about the NFL, but it was on the table. Everything was on the table.

That morning, after a brutal 5 a.m. swim practice, Nick jogged up from the indoor pool, towel slung around his neck, earbuds in. The hallway lights caught the water still clinging to his skin, outlining every carved line of muscle on his back, shoulders, and abs. His hoodie hung half-zipped over his broad frame. People looked. They always did.

His **eyes were sky-blue**, sharp and cold when they needed to be, soft when he turned on the charm. They made people pause — just long enough for Nick to get what he wanted. Paired with his messy dark hair, sun-kissed skin, and a smirk that said “you know I’m trouble,” he was built like a problem nobody wanted to solve.

His phone buzzed.

**Alicia 💋**  
"Dinner with my parents on Friday. Please don’t wear sneakers. Love u 😘"

He didn’t reply. Not yet.

Alicia Banks was the kind of girl people didn’t date — they *auditioned* for her. She was loud, gorgeous, and sharper than any rumor that followed her around. Nick was her boyfriend, and in Westford’s social food chain, that made them campus royalty.

But as he stepped outside into the crisp September air, something didn’t feel right. Not bad — just… off. Like a glitch in a perfect system.

That’s when he noticed the guy.

Standing near the scholarship bulletin board was someone he didn’t recognize — rare for Nick, who practically knew the whole freshman class. **Jayden**, if he remembered right from orientation. Low-profile. Quiet. Always sitting near the back of lecture halls.

He wore a secondhand jacket, black jeans, and sneakers that had seen better days. He wasn’t flashy, wasn’t loud — but there was something magnetic about him. **Warm brown skin**, locs tied back in a loose knot, and wire-frame glasses that slipped every few minutes. His energy was calm, almost… grounded.

But what caught Nick off guard wasn’t the look — it was the sound.

Jayden had earbuds in and was singing softly under his breath. Barely audible. But the notes were perfect. His voice didn’t just hit; it *held*. Like it wasn’t made to impress anyone — it just *existed*, and if you were lucky enough to catch it, you felt it.

Nick slowed his steps without realizing.

Jayden didn’t look up.

He didn’t notice Nick Rivera — or he did, and didn’t care.

Weird.

Everyone noticed Nick. Everyone cared.

Back in the locker room, Coach Miller clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re looking tight, Rivera. Keep that up and regionals are yours. Maybe nationals.”

Nick nodded, tossed on a shirt, and headed out.

But the sound lingered.

Jayden’s voice played back in his mind like a song he couldn’t remember the name of, but wanted to hear again.

And that night, lying next to Alicia while she planned their fall formal outfits and giggled about party invites, Nick stared at the ceiling.

Still hearing that voice.

Still wondering why something so quiet had cut through his perfectly loud life.

**Chapter 2 – That Guy**

Jayden Cole wasn’t popular.

He wasn’t the kind of guy who threw parties, ran for student government, or dated anyone out of Westford’s social bubble. He came in on a **full scholarship** — academic and arts-based. First in his family to attend college, let alone one with *legacy walls and polished brass handrails*.

He kept his head down, moved with purpose, and spoke only when necessary. If you asked around, most people didn’t know his name. And if they did, it was probably because they heard him sing.

He didn’t perform often. Once at orientation, once at a random open mic night in the student lounge. That was enough. Word got around.

Nick hadn’t heard him since that morning by the bulletin board. But the voice stuck in his head like smoke.

And that was starting to become a problem.

Nick didn’t like thinking too hard about things. He preferred motion. Training. Sex. Games. Fast days and faster nights. Alicia made everything feel secure — their routines, her rules, the way she kissed like she owned him.

But in the quiet hours, **Jayden** had started to take up space in his thoughts — not loudly, but consistently. Like background music in a film scene where something big was about to happen.

It pissed him off.

So he did what he always did — **ignored it**.

Until Wednesday.

Media Studies, 10:00 a.m.

Nick walked in late again. Hair still damp from his swim. Hoodie halfway on. Girls looked. Guys gave him nods. Usual.

Only this time, the back row wasn’t empty.

Jayden was there. Headphones on. Pen tapping against his notebook. Glasses sliding again. He didn't look up when Nick passed him, but Nick noticed the smallest twitch — like Jayden had felt him enter the room.

Professor Langley was going on about narrative structure and audience bias.

Nick wasn’t listening.

Not to the lecture, anyway.

He kept glancing back. Just once. Then again. And again. Jayden was just… there. Not performing. Not trying. Just being.

It was annoying.

And interesting.

And annoying.

After class, Nick lingered outside the building, pretending to scroll his phone. Jayden came out a few minutes later, hoodie zipped to his neck, backpack slung low. They almost collided.

“Yo,” Nick said.

Jayden paused. “Hey.”

His voice was softer in conversation — still musical, but grounded.

“I heard you sing,” Nick said. “At open mic?”

Jayden looked surprised. “Didn’t think anyone remembered that.”

Nick shrugged. “I did.”

There was a brief silence.

Jayden smiled — barely, but it reached his eyes.

“Well… thanks, I guess.”

He adjusted his backpack and started to walk away.

Nick stood there for a second longer than he should’ve. Watching him leave.

That night, Alicia came over in a red crop top and thigh-high boots, talking about a party on Saturday and some modeling scout who followed her on Instagram. She straddled Nick’s lap and kissed him, deeply, her hands already tugging at his shirt.

But halfway through, when she whispered, “You want me?” into his ear, something cracked in him.

Because for half a second, his brain flashed back to that hallway.

To that voice.

To **Jayden**.

He kissed Alicia harder, almost like he was trying to erase the thought.

It didn’t work.

**Chapter 3 – Cracks in Perfection**

Nick didn’t talk about feelings.  
He had Alicia for that.  
She felt enough for both of them.

Thursday afternoon, she was already on his bed, laptop open, scrolling Pinterest boards titled *“Fall Formal Slay”* and *“Matching Couple Looks 💯.”*

Nick leaned against the doorway of his condo bedroom, towel slung around his neck, hair still wet from practice.

Alicia looked up and smiled. “What do you think about burgundy? You’d look so hot in a burgundy tux.”

He forced a grin. “Yeah, sure.”

“Or navy? Ooh — you with your shoulders? Navy would kill.”

He laughed softly, walked over, and sat on the edge of the bed. She leaned in and kissed his neck.

“I love when you’re quiet like this,” she whispered. “So intense. So mysterious.”

Nick wrapped an arm around her, kissed her back, but his mind was… somewhere else.

Someone else.

**Jayden** had started showing up more.

Not in a literal way — Jayden was always in the back row, always quiet, always fading into the edges of Westford’s glossy image.

But Nick noticed him now.  
He noticed **everything**.

The way Jayden hummed when he was deep in thought. The way he always brought a pen, never a laptop. The way he touched his glasses every time he was about to say something smart in class, like it gave him confidence.

And the worst part?  
**Jayden was brilliant.** Like, “first-to-finish-the-exam” brilliant. Like, “professors-know-him-by-name-after-two-weeks” brilliant.

But no one talked about him.

He didn’t party. Didn’t flirt. Didn’t compete.

And yet, he was… magnetic. Without even trying.

That **did** threaten something in Nick.  
Not his image — his identity.

Because for the first time, Nick wasn’t sure if the life he’d built actually *fit* him.

Friday morning, in class, Professor Langley paired students up for a semester-long project.

Nick barely heard her call the names until—

“Nick Rivera and Jayden Cole.”

His stomach dipped.

Jayden looked up. Their eyes met. No reaction.

Nick blinked first.

Later, they sat across from each other in the library. Jayden was already flipping through the project prompt. Nick was half-watching him, half-scrolling his phone.

“I was thinking we split the work 50-50,” Jayden said. “I’ll handle the theory side, if you’re good with visuals.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “You assuming I can’t handle theory?”

Jayden looked at him — calm, unbothered. “No. I’m assuming you’d rather not.”

Nick smirked. “Touché.”

They worked for two hours. Quiet, efficient, focused.

And then, out of nowhere:

“You ever feel like everyone knows you but… nobody actually does?”

Jayden asked it casually, eyes still on his notebook.

Nick blinked. “What?”

Jayden shrugged. “Forget it.”

Nick didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

That night, at Alicia’s dinner, he smiled on cue. Laughed at her dad’s jokes. Talked football stats with her brother. Told her mom he was applying for an internship he hadn’t even looked at.

But when Alicia rested her hand on his thigh under the table, he felt cold.

Not disgusted. Not angry.

Just… distant.

Somewhere in his chest, something was breaking open — not loudly.  
Just enough to let **Jayden’s voice** in.

**Chapter 4 – The Shift**

Nick couldn’t sleep.

The night after Alicia’s dinner, everything felt too tight — the sheets, the room, his own skin.

He turned over for the third time, checked his phone. 2:34 AM. Notifications: nothing that mattered. He closed his eyes again, finally letting himself drift off…

And then he dreamed.

Not the hazy, forgettable kind.

It was **Jayden**.

They were alone — library maybe, or somewhere quiet and golden. Jayden was looking at him, not like everyone else did, but like he *saw* him. Like he wasn’t just the rich swimmer guy, the Ivy-bound prodigy. No pressure. No performance.

And then Jayden leaned forward.

The kiss wasn’t wild or desperate — it was **gentle**. Soft lips. A slow exhale.  
Nick felt it in his whole body.

When he woke up, his chest was tight, heart pounding.

He didn’t move.

He didn’t want to.

Monday came fast.

Nick didn’t mention the dream. Not to himself. Not to anyone. He wore it like a secret under his clothes — hot and unspoken.

Jayden was waiting at their usual table in the library.

“Hey,” he said casually, sliding over a printed outline. “I sketched out the structure.”

Nick nodded, sat across from him. “Cool. Looks solid.”

They worked for hours. Music playing low from Jayden’s laptop. The kind of playlist that made time blur: Daniel Caesar, Frank Ocean, Jorja Smith. Warm voices. Long pauses.

At one point, their hands brushed reaching for the same pen.

Neither pulled back.

Jayden glanced up, surprised — or maybe not. His brown eyes locked with Nick’s for a second too long.

“Nick,” he said softly.

Nick’s heart kicked.

“What?”

Jayden hesitated. “Nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing.

Later that night, they took a break outside. Sat on the concrete ledge behind the library, where the night was cool and quiet. No one was around.

Nick lit a cigarette, something he rarely did, and offered one to Jayden. He declined.

Jayden leaned back, arms resting behind him.

“You know what’s funny?” he said. “People think I’m quiet ‘cause I’m shy. I’m not. I’m just… tired of proving myself.”

Nick exhaled smoke. “I don’t think you’re shy.”

Jayden looked over. “No?”

Nick shook his head. “I think you’re… honest. That’s more dangerous than anything.”

Another silence.

Then Jayden said, voice low:  
“You ever feel like you’re playing a role you never auditioned for?”

Nick swallowed hard.

He thought of Alicia’s perfect Instagram. Of his parents’ expectations. Of his name, his body, his image — all of it. Heavy.

He looked at Jayden.

And something broke.

He kissed him.

Quick. Desperate. Like breathing underwater too long and finally coming up for air.

Jayden didn’t move for a second.

Then — slowly — he kissed him back.

It didn’t last long.

Nick pulled away, face pale.

“Shit,” he whispered. “I—I can’t—”

He stood up fast, grabbed his hoodie, and left without another word.

Jayden didn’t follow.

But the kiss stayed.

### Chapter 5

Nick became an expert at excuses.  
Swim practice ran late.  
Coach needs me for football drills.  
Something came up at home.

Three times in one week, he dodged Jayden and their project meetings. And every lie left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He tried covering it up by spending more time with Alicia. Holding her hand in the halls. Sitting closer at lunch. Laughing too loudly at her stories. She smiled, but Nick could see the questions in her eyes. She wasn’t stupid. She knew he was somewhere else, even when he was right beside her.

Still, he couldn’t face Jayden. Not after the kiss. Not with the way his chest tightened every time he remembered it.

The breaking point came in the locker room.  
Marcus leaned against the bench, towel over his shoulder, his voice pitched for laughs.  
“Can’t believe they wasted a scholarship on choir-boy Jayden. What’s he gonna do—sing us into the playoffs?” A few guys snorted.

Then Marcus added, lower but sharp enough to cut:  
“Bet he’s a faggot, anyway.”

The word landed like a punch. A couple of the guys looked away. Someone chuckled nervously. Nick froze, blood boiling.

He told himself to stay quiet. To keep the mask on. But the thought of Marcus dragging Jayden through the mud while Nick sat silent—  
“Shut the hell up, Marcus.”

The room stilled.  
Marcus blinked, then smirked. “Relax, man. Just a joke.”  
Nick stood, voice steady even as his hands trembled. “No. You don’t get to talk about him like that. Not when you don’t know a damn thing.”

Marcus shrugged, muttering under his breath as he walked off. But the silence that followed felt louder than anything. Nick’s pulse was still hammering when he sat back down.

Later that day, Nick found Alicia waiting by the lockers. She smiled, hopeful. “You good? You’ve been weird lately.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. For once, he didn’t want another excuse.  
“Alicia… you’re great. You don’t deserve me dragging you into my mess. I’m sorry.”

Her smile faltered, eyes searching his face. She nodded slowly, like she’d already known. “It’s about him, isn’t it?”

Nick couldn’t answer, but the silence was enough. She gave a sad, soft smile. “Then go figure it out. Don’t string me along.”

“I won’t,” Nick whispered. “Thank you.”

He found Jayden later, by the back entrance, packing his books with sharp, angry movements.

“Jayden.”

Jayden didn’t look up. “What’s the excuse today? Saving puppies? Secret mission?”

Nick winced. “I deserve that. I was a coward. I avoided you because I didn’t know how to deal with… with what happened.” He exhaled shakily. “But today, Marcus ran his mouth. And for once, I couldn’t just sit there. I realized—I don’t want to keep hiding. Not from them. Not from you.”

Jayden finally looked up, eyes tired but burning. “I didn’t need you to fight my battles, Nick. I just needed you to show up.”

Nick nodded, throat tight. “Then let me. I’m here now.”

For a long beat, they held each other’s gaze. The air was still, thick with everything unsaid. Then, slowly, Jayden’s shoulders loosened.

A small, reluctant smile tugged at his lips. “Took you long enough.”

Nick let out a breath that was almost a laugh, almost a sob. And though the world around them hadn’t changed—the project still loomed, the whispers of classmates still lingered—something between them finally had.

The excuses were gone.  
And for the first time, Nick felt like he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

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